

John Channing Ruff, GA - 2012

I first visited Washington, D.C. in elementary school and fell in love with government and public service. I remember staring through the iron fence at the White House and being totally entranced. I could only dream of meeting the men and women behind the marble facades and important titles. This past March, my dream came true when I represented the state of Georgia to the United States Senate Youth Program. The all-expense-paid, weeklong trip would indeed be one of the most memorable and joyful times of my life.

Eight years after my field trip to Washington I found myself standing in the East Wing of the White House, waiting to meet the President of the United States alongside the other 103 student delegates. As I watched Marine One's rotor blades blow cherry blossoms around the Kennedy Garden, I could not help but feel like a mesmerized elementary school boy again. That memory will remain with me for the rest of my life, but it is only one of the many experiences provided by the United States Senate Youth Program. The day before we visited the White House we met with my favorite speaker, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta.

Secretary Panetta was passionate and refreshingly candid when he spoke with us in the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel. He explained how we are either governed by crisis or by leadership, because crisis drives policy when those in power are not willing to compromise. He told us that he puts his faith in the American people, faith that we will hold our leaders accountable and force them to govern and make the "tough decisions." The Secretary also felt that the brave men and women who serve in our armed forces today are comparable to "the greatest generation." After interacting with our Military Mentors, I must agree. They exemplified the honor, courage, and intelligence that makes our military and our nation great. I was inspired to always put duty ahead of personal gain, and value common sense and cooperation no matter what the cost.

However, it was not only the speakers, our immaculate treatment, or unprecedented access that made Washington Week special. Everything paled in comparison to the camaraderie I shared with the other 103 student delegates. Their brilliance, zeal, and unwavering desire to make the world a better place gave me hope for a better future. No matter the outcome of our discussions or debates, we always remained friends and strived to learn from each other. We set an example that would serve society well.

The United States Senate Youth Program highlights how a combination of hard work, determination, and diligence is the key to achieving one's goals. By exhibiting these traits, the dream of resolving our differences and making our nation a better place may very well become reality.