When I applied for the Baker Center Living and Learning Community before my freshman year at UT, I knew very little about Senator Howard Baker Jr. I had seen a video clip of the Watergate hearings in high school and was aware of his reputation for bipartisanship. But, I wanted to join the learning community because I was interested in public policy and civic engagement and, being from a small town, I was hoping to find my niche on campus. Over the next four years, the Baker Center truly became my home on campus, and the influence of Senator Baker molded my time at the university.

As a freshman in the learning community, I took classes on public policy, had a semester-long policy simulation, debated in weekly roundtable discussions, and saw policy in action through a service-learning course. After my freshman year, I began working at the Baker Center and became a Baker Ambassador. I worked on voter registration drives, planned events and programs, and educated my peers on how to become politically engaged. My junior year, I was accepted into the Baker Scholars program and undertook a two-year research project on a policy issue, which I presented as my senior thesis.

Each of these student programs was created and implemented in the image of Senator Baker with his advice and input. We were encouraged to learn about the political climate around us as well as the issues that affected us. We were shown how to insert ourselves into the dialogue and view ourselves as stakeholders in the community. We were empowered to be the agents that shape change in the world around us. But, most importantly, although we became educated, opinionated, and empowered in our beliefs, we learned that in order to implement any of our own ideas, we always had to understand and respect the beliefs and ideas of others. Nothing can be achieved without working with persons who have different opinions than you.

I graduated in May and stayed in Knoxville to continue working at the Baker Center before entering Harvard Law School this fall. I will never forget lowering the flags when Senator Baker passed away. I spent the next few weeks archiving articles, reports, editorials, opinion pieces, and interviews from all of the nation’s largest news sources and the biggest names in politics. But, I was most impressed by the reaction of my peers. My Facebook and Twitter newfeeds exploded with shared articles, reposted quotes, and status updates from current students and recent alumni about Senator Baker and how they were inspired by him.

When the senator was lying in repose at the Baker Center, young adults streamed through the door to pay their respects. It was this that meant more to me than any black-and-white slide-show that aired on CNN because it demonstrated that although he is no longer with us, Senator Baker’s legacy continues to grow. When you think of his legacy, it is natural to think of his many achievements in office and while practicing law, but also look at what he created to endure long after he was gone. Look to the packed auditoriums at the Baker Center when hundreds of students arrive to watch the presidential debates, the workrooms where Baker Scholars are drinking coffee at midnight while completing policy research, and the classrooms where classes on public policy and civic engagement are taught each day.

Although the Great Conciliator is no longer with us, he has established the avenues for the next leaders to emerge. And that, in my opinion, is the greatest legacy of Senator Baker.

By Lisa Dicker (’14)