

Grant Laufer, AZ - 2015

I should just say, before I begin, how impossible it is to reduce one of the most amazing weeks of my life to a few short paragraphs. I made so many friends, and had such once in a lifetime opportunities, that I still struggle to talk about it with friends and family without pinching myself. I am truly so thankful for the Hearst Foundations and USSYP team for all the amazing resources and work they put into the program.

In regards to the speakers, it's a toss-up among some amazing individuals. As a news junkie, I particularly enjoyed Deputy Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Vanita Gupta's lecture on Ferguson and the issues involved in the report the Justice Department recently released. To listen to the opinion of someone who had a hands on role in crafting the federal response to the death and subsequent riots there was incredibly informative for me. I am fascinated by race relations in America, and Ms. Gupta had a compelling life story that made her speech all the more interesting. To get to the point, this was one of my favorite speeches because it allowed a fascinating speaker to discuss an issue that is one of the most important current events, and it was highly rewarding for me.

In addition, the speeches by World Bank President Jim Yong Kim and his associate were both educational and highly involved. I loved hearing their stories of getting to where they are today, which offered so many of us an instruction on progressing in the field we are enamored with. Their casual but highly informative style was fantastic, and I left wishing I could spend a few more hours talking with them about the global economy and how to solve the issues developing countries face today.

The speeches that provided the most real-world information, and done in the most approachable manner, proved to be the most memorable. As someone who has never really been into cyber security, I ended up learning so much by sitting next to a cyber-security analyst at the State Department lunch. We were able to discuss combating terrorist propaganda online and the role Edward Snowden had on national security and American diplomacy, and I left not only with a greater knowledge of what our country faces on a day-to-day basis, but with a greater appreciation for the type of work cyber-security specialists do. It's these type of small, unplanned, but amazingly insightful experiences that I will cherish from my USSYP week.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the fantastic advice and friendship offered by our Military Mentors. Whether it was talking about the day's events with my mentor, or discussing philosophy and college decisions with the others, they always offered a friendly smile or an astute piece of advice, and I am so grateful I got to have them as role models.

Lastly, I am so thankful to meet all of the fellow delegates on the program. It's not easy to find more than hundred students who have similar interests and passions, but USSYP offered me the chance to. I'll treasure the friendships I made within my group and with the other delegates on the program, and I look forward to seeing them leave their marks on America's political, economic, and social justice history.

Again, I'd like to thank the Hearst Foundations and everyone who worked to make Washington Week special. Thank you for the experience of a lifetime!