

Mara Tazartus, DE - 2015

“It’s hard to hate up close.” In our question and answer session with Senators Susan Collins and Cory Gardner, this Chris Christie quote presented itself in an anecdote about the New Jersey governor. Looking back on my experience during Washington Week I can testify that once one experiences being “up close” as the Christie quote references, two outcomes result. First, the proximity improves knowledge and understanding, and second, the courtesy displayed in arranging and participating in the “up close” interaction sparks newfound respect for all parties involved. The United States Senate Youth program awarded me a unique opportunity to see aspects of the United States Senate and the United States Armed Forces “up close,” and my respect and knowledge of these institutions, and the men and women that comprise these pillars of our democracy, increased drastically as a result.

From a distance, labeling or judging members of the U.S. Senate appears simple. Whole groups of citizens commonly discount a Senator, and all of his/her ideas, simply because that senator belongs to a different political party. However, blanket generalization fail to prevail once an “up close” opportunity presents itself. When a senator stands before you, takes time out of his/her day, and answers your questions, the focus falls on that senator’s thoughts and views as an individual—which is why these speakers were always the most impactful to me. When Senator Joe Manchin took time to speak, and shook my hand, he did not do so as a representative of the Democratic Party, but rather as an individual with views and beliefs entirely his own. After this experience, I will never describe Senator Manchin simply as a “Democrat.” Individuals remain more complex than their political identification; this notion became stronger and stronger with every new speaker. Respect for people as individuals with unique and valuable backgrounds must supersede mass generalization both outside and inside the U.S. Senate in order for meaningful dialogue and solutions for the countries obstacles to surface.

For me personally, an even more transformative “up close” experience comprised the opportunity to engage with our military mentors. For those not familiar with it, or connected to it directly by friends or family, the Armed Forces can conjure an intimidating image. Before attending USSYP, I assumed that the military only required Americans with specific skill sets. Technological geniuses and combat specialists were the only people who made the cut in my limited idea of the Armed Forces. After meeting all of the military mentors at USSYP, and speaking extensively with my group’s mentor about her experience in the Navy, I understand now that the Armed Forces requires immense diversity of thought and skill. I never realized that someone like myself could serve her country. Now, as a result of USSYP providing me with an “up close” connection to talented and inspiring members of the United States Armed Forces, I am considering serving as well.

An “up close” experience comprises an invaluable opportunity for improved understanding and respect; As long as USSYP continues its emphasis on these experiences the program will continue its phenomenal legacy.