

Devyn Rigsby, IL – 2015

Diversity. It's a political buzzword, no doubt. Candidates craft campaigns to appeal to a diverse voting base, education experts write policy to promote diversity in school, and political officials talk of diversifying Washington to better represent all Americans.

But at the United States Senate Youth Program, diversity doesn't need to be created; it's inherent. Delegates, mentors, and speakers at USSYP 2015 ran the gamut of regional, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, offering a unique opportunity for dialogue and discussion. We swapped stories of our hometowns, compared our plans for the future, and endlessly debated the causes behind political polarization. On a deeper level, however, these conversations gave me firsthand insight into the wide range of American experiences. As I strive to be an effective leader for the 21st century, I carry with me these lessons in inclusiveness and collaboration. USSYP compelled me to reconsider what it means to represent all American people and how my generation can best address the varied and complex problems we face. For me, the Washington Week experience served as a call to action: to campaign for justice and equality, to seek creative and inclusive solutions, and to use my talents for the betterment of my nation.

Our nation's youth face considerable challenges as we move into the ranks of American leadership. Many speakers referred to my generation as the "fixer-uppers," the ones who will deal with climate change and budget crises and international security threats and every other current contentious political question. "We're counting on you to solve these problems" was a recurring theme. At USSYP, I found 103 other students just as honored as I was to take up this charge. The bigger challenge, I believe, is convincing our peers to become involved as well. Through conversation both at the program and in my own community, I have heard firsthand that young Americans feel disconnected from their government. Many believe that their elected officials do not adequately represent their viewpoints and fail to address issues relevant to their demographic. Thus a major theme in both student and speaker conversations was equality and justice in government and law. Senator Susan Collins encouraged more young women to enter politics, citing a female-driven bipartisan effort to end the 2013 government shutdown. Women, she stated, "elevate civility" in government and bring a different and refreshing governance style to counteract the often hard-handed traditional male leadership. Vanita Gupta, Assistant U.S. Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division, detailed her legal campaign to protect the right to vote and uphold equality of the law for all Americans. She cited minority groups' discomfort with government as a key factor in creating conflict, stating that "mistrust reduces public safety." These women's efforts to increase American inclusiveness and equality, from the streets of St. Louis to Capitol Hill, reaffirmed my own desire to serve in government and bring a new feminine perspective to leadership.

But not everyone is willing or able to serve in government, so even if we increase women's and minorities' presence in Washington, how can we convince all members of the Millennial Generation to carry out their civic duty? In his speech to USSYP delegates, Senator Joe Manchin asserted that the key to fostering patriotism is community service. Reasoning that all Americans can afford to spare a fraction of their time and talents for the betterment of their neighborhoods, he proposed a mandatory service requirement for those enrolled in subsidized community college. Bringing students together for a common purpose would enact powerful changes in American communities and work to eliminate the apathy toward government seen among youth. As an enthusiastic volunteer myself, I found Senator Manchin's message to be very meaningful. My interest in government stems from my experiences of improving my school and church communities by sharing my interests and talents with others. I am confident that, if American students were required to assist in the improvement of their community, they would not only contribute positively to the local area's development but also emerge with a sense of personal pride and desire to remain involved in leadership and activism. Thus the distinction of "service" need not be limited to the relatively few Washington politicians; civic duty begins by sharing talents to help build the local community and ultimately strengthen the nation as a whole.

The most powerful takeaway on the meaning of serving one's country, however, came from my interaction with the USSYP Military Mentors. I had never considered the military as an option for me, a petite girl with little interest in fighter jets or automatic weapons. But my mentors caused me to reevaluate this notion. I admired their discipline, dedication, courage, and sacrifice. I was amazed at the various career paths that led each of them to join the Armed Services. Few served in active combat, yet each brought a particular talent or skill—language proficiency, marksmanship, business administration, law, medicine—without which a successful mission would be impossible. To me, these servicemen and servicewomen exemplify commitment and loyalty, and they have inspired me view service in terms of living out American values not only in my community or in government but also in areas of conflict and need around the world.

Delegates, mentors, and speakers of the 2015 United States Senate Youth Program represented the remarkable diversity of America, but we were all united in their desire to serve our country and encourage our peers to do the same. Though creating lasting solutions to lingering governmental issues, achieving a truly representative and just government, and cultivating a politically vibrant citizenry are significant challenges, I am convinced that the delegates of USSYP 2015 are ready to accept these responsibilities and lead America forward, stronger than ever, into the 21st century.