

Emily Johansson, IL - 2015

There are no adequate words to describe Washington Week. It was unlike anything I have ever experienced and was more than I ever dared to hope. I could spend days on end speaking about my time in D.C. (and I have definitely tried), but I'm only allotted these two pages.

My journey to the United States Senate Youth Program was a long one. I first applied to the program my junior year in the fall of 2013 and for a moment I thought that was where my journey would end after I found out I had not been selected as a delegate. Determined to experience a program that I had heard so many wonderful things about, I reapplied my senior year and was fortunate enough to be chosen as a delegate for the state of Illinois. The only obstacle in my path from that point on was a faulty airline that kept me and a fellow delegate in the St. Louis airport for eight hours on the first travel day.

Once I finally landed in D.C., I was excited, relieved, and overwhelmed with anticipation. I may not have known it then but this program was about to introduce me to some of my best friends and give me opportunities I had never thought possible.

One of those opportunities was meeting the president of the United States of America, Barack Obama. Just watching the leader of our nation walk down the red carpeted hallway and enter into the East Room of the White House was surreal. Shaking his hand and telling him who I was, where I was from, and where I went to school was all the more astounding.

There were so many times during the week that I felt like my life was changing (and I don't think I'm being *too* dramatic), but that moment was particularly impactful. It was then that I think I realized how positively fortunate I was to be experiencing all that the Hearst Foundations and the U.S. Senate were working to provide for us.

The behind-the-scenes tours and VIP access were one thing, but the 103 other delegates were another level on their own. I'm wholly confident that I've established life-long relationships with so many people from USSYP; without them, my experience would not have been the same. As I'm writing this essay I'm also filling out three of their birthday cards, planning a massive group-chat, and thinking about what state our first reunion is going to be in. I know that I'm only a phone call or message away from one of the other delegates whenever I want to reminisce about the hysterical last dinner we had or re-packing all my luggage at 3:00 am before my flight.

Every student selected for USSYP is special in their own way and each has something to contribute to the experience. During a speaking session, Major Garrett told us, "If you think about yourself in only one way, you're limiting yourself...other people will do that for you." I always felt welcome among the other delegates and the Mayflower Hotel felt like home from the moment I walked in. USSYP allows our nation's "future leaders" to develop and see for themselves all that they and their peers are worth.

I remember reading all 104 delegate essays from the previous year to prepare myself for USSYP. If there is anything I could say to future delegates it is this: although you may feel a little overwhelmed at the immense and amazing opportunity facing you, be excited, know that your hard work will pay off, and in the words of Virginia delegate Caleb Visser, "stay driven."