

Victor Agbafe, NC - 2015

From my day of arrival to the last waning moments of my early morning trip back to the airport every moment of my week at the United States Senate Youth Program was filled with exhilarating events and memorable moments that changed my life. From listening to Senator Joe Manchin speak to our group to meeting President Barack Obama I was blessed with many great opportunities to meet and discuss with national leaders. At the same time, our visits to venues like Arlington National Cemetery and Mount Vernon give me a constant inextricable tie to the past and current sacrifice individuals have made to preserve the freedom and opportunity that we as Americans are blessed with and often take for granted. My experiences at the United States Senate Youth Program not only opened my horizons to new perspectives on service but also instilled in me a different insight into the characters of our national statesman.

First, the stimulating conversations with my fellow delegates as well as the great interactions with our national leaders exposed me to new ideas on the meaning and experience of public service. As many of my fellow delegates hailed from all over the U.S. and even abroad, each one brought a unique experience which has led them to espouse different viewpoints on many pertinent issues across the social and fiscal policy diaspora. This combined with the very tolerant atmosphere allowed for some of the best and most beneficial of ideological exchanges on many issues while also allowing for some mutual laughter on pertinent political puns. In addition to that listening to individuals like Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough speak on how "she never saw her mother stop working" as a single mother to provide for her and how this inspires her in her public service each and every day on the job. This experience made me more willing and able to see how one can tie in one's personal story and background and utilize it in order to be a more effective public service leader.

Furthermore, my meeting many leaders of the two most popular political parties in the U.S. gave me a new lease on our national leaders. Prior to the United States Senate Youth Program, it was easy for me to look at a senator or congressman or congresswoman and cast an initial judgment based on their voting record or media appearances. Now I have seen that regardless of one's political leanings that all members of our governmental institutions have great intentions and seek to do what is best for our nation. In addition to this, I saw first-hand how many of these individuals realize there is an issue with the increasing polarization in our country and the accompanying gridlock it results in. In fact, Senator Cory Gardner cited his fellow Republican ally New Jersey Governor Chris Christie whose success in working in a primarily Democratic-controlled state legislature has been based on the ideal that it is "hard to hate up close." In addition to this, Democrat Joe Manchin of West Virginia cited how "[he] will not raise one penny against a Republican" as he feels like raising money against colleagues hinders much needed relationships. Overall, I saw that the lack of real progress in Washington was not the people themselves but rather the systems like the busy daily schedule and media appearances that didn't allow these leaders to form the relationships needed to compromise and tackle many issues facing society today.

Overall, the United States Senate Youth Program has given me both a new look at the work of our nation's leaders and a new hope for an era of decreased partisanship. While this program lasted a week its impact on me will stretch far beyond a temporal calculation.