

Elsa Knight, NE - 2015

When asked to write about my experience at the United States Senate Youth Program, I knew right away that I wouldn't be able to fit the true experience onto a couple sheets of paper. When I first applied to the program, I didn't expect to make it in. So when I received the acceptance packet in the mail, I was ecstatic. It didn't seem real that in a few short months, I would be experiencing the best week of my life: One filled with events that not even most adults could even imagine. However, when the plane touched down in Washington, D.C., I knew that a dream was about to come true.

The United States Youth Senate is a program sponsored by the Hearst Foundations and the U.S. Senate. Each year, two high school student delegates are selected from each state, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense's overseas educational activities after a rigorous testing and interviewing process. Each delegate receives a \$5,000 scholarship, as well as an all-expense paid week-long trip to Washington, D.C., titled Washington Week.

Living in rural Nebraska, spending most of my life in a town of 600 and attending a K-12 school, traveling to Washington, D.C., was the first of the many new achievements that I accomplished during Washington Week. From there, I met my other 103 delegates. These students, from the islands of Hawaii to the marshes of Florida, were from all different walks of life: Somali, Indian, Native American, Christian, Sikh. Diversity was commonplace. There was one thing, however, that brought all of us together--our love and dedication for public service. Bound by this familiarity, the delegates at the United States Youth Senate were determined, smart, and already prepared to take on the problems of our world.

The speakers that we listened to during the week also had this passion for public service. Throughout the week, influential people such as Senator Joe Manchin III, former chief Judge Robert Henry, and Secretary of the Senate Julie Adams taught us that serving our community isn't just on a local level, but on a national level, too. One of the most memorable quotes that I'll remember regarding this topic is from President Barack Obama: "Don't focus on what you want to be. Focus on what you want to do." These words truly, in my opinion, represent the passion that our generation needs to have.

Our group visited many different places throughout Washington D.C. during this trip. We visited many memorials and historically important buildings. However, my favorite place was the Newseum. As the title suggests, the Newseum is a museum focused on the history of news. As the official tagline goes: There's more to every story. Indeed, there is! As the delegates roamed the floors, we learned the history of the news, the struggle of attaining free press, and the background stories to each Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph throughout the years. I was reminded that we as United States citizens are very lucky to have the freedom that we currently possess.

Our Military Mentors were definitely a highlight in the week. I was constantly inspired by the amount of work and service each of them provide for our country. Because of our Military Mentors, I was able to attain a different perspective on a non-civilian way of life. Besides giving the delegates words of advice on almost every single situation, (possible or not), the Mentors also made every delegate feel welcome at every meal and social situation. Even as someone who tends to observe more than interact, there was never a time where I felt isolated or out of the group.

Washington Week was a truly unique experience. Through all of the behind-the-scenes access and time that we spent with our fellow delegates, a tight knit group was created, one that I know is prepared to change the world and represent our country for years to come. My only regret is not getting all of the delegates' autographs!

I want to thank everyone involved for making this experience one of the most treasured weeks of my life. The United States Senate Youth Program was the most wonderful program that I've had the honor of attending. I am forever grateful.