

Dallas McCash, TN – 2015

In the beginning, I chalked up my essays, tests, and application for the United States Senate Youth Program as just another scholarship opportunity that I needed to apply for in order to be able to afford to attend college. Winning the award of \$5,000 for the purpose of attending university would be incredibly helpful, so I took the application seriously. My initial thought about Washington Week was that it was probably going to be a fun, camp-like experience with a bunch of other kids checking out monuments and museums. Imagine my surprise when I realized that what was actually awarded to me was an extraordinarily memorable experience that I would treasure, and that the scholarship, for which I am extremely grateful, was actually going to turn out to be the least important part of my experience.

From the notification of the award, I found myself being propelled into adulthood. I was given itineraries, agendas, and detailed instructions, and it was up to me to meet all the criteria. How many 17 year olds can say they were flown, by themselves, to Washington DC, met by a military escort, and then whisked to the Mayflower hotel ballroom for a reception in his or her honor? Stepping off the plane in Washington D.C., it hit me just how huge a deal this program is. I walked into the Mayflower Hotel and met other delegates who were just as much in awe as I was. All around us were the smiling faces of the wonderfully talented and uber-prepared Program Directors who supplied us with bags, books, and brochures, etc., and the Military Mentors who helped us become organized and inducted into smaller collective groups inside of our larger group.

After gathering with other delegates that provided a collection of the brightest young political minds America has to offer from places like Ohio, Alabama, Mississippi and Hawaii, I decided to check out the agenda for the week to see what we would be doing with our time. What I saw on the agenda was something I had only dreamt about—I found I would be meeting with the most powerful political figures of our time. I started listing out loud the names of people who I was excited to meet: Robert Henry, former Chief Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit; Senator Joe Manchin III; Dr. Jim Yong Kim, president of the World Bank Group; Senator Johnny Isakson; Jeh Johnson, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security; Justice Stephen Breyer; and the highlight of the program, the president of the United States: Barack Obama. As a member of a speech and debate team I have to be familiar with all of these political names. I have seen their faces on television countless times, and quoted their words to back up arguments I present in speech competitions. It was mindboggling to think that I now had the chance to meet with them in the flesh, on their own turf, to hear their wisdom and ask them questions in order to experience their take on our nation's political system firsthand.

Reminiscing on this opportunity, the phrase "life changing" comes to mind, but not just as a cliché saying. This program truly is "life changing." From the advice that President Obama gave us, "Worry more about what you want to do rather than what you want to be," to Dr. Jim Yong Kim describing the goals of the World Bank and how it is trying to make the world a better place, this program truly presented all of the delegates with life changing inspiration. As for myself, personally, I came out of this program more of an adult after one week than my previous 17 years had been able to form. I say that because once I was able to see such a big picture and the importance of the various missions our government officials carry out, I was unable to care only about myself anymore. Instead, I came away with a worldview. This worldview includes my full participation, but participation on behalf of, and to the benefit of, others more than myself

The United States Senate and The Hearst Foundations' brilliantly ring Washington Week with a visit to George Washington's tomb at the beginning and a visit to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the end. It struck me right then and there that from the greatest known of America's public servants to the least known and nameless public servant, each man and woman deciding to be a public servant offers up his or her life for our country in the service of others. That was a true moment of growth and it was transformative for me to realize I am willing to do just that. This is yet another thing for which I am grateful.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to The Hearst Foundations, a truly gracious benefactor, as well as to Senator Manchin III and Senator Isakson, our inspirational Senate patrons, for providing us with these experiences. This week has truly been one of the greatest weeks in my life. I join the ranks of the USSYP alumni with great pride.