

Jocelyn E. Hernandez, TX – 2015

An uncontrollable chatter permeated the ballroom of the historic Mayflower Hotel with anticipation. The ambiance of the event flowed through the hallways of the venue as blood flows through arteries, pumping life into every orifice of the hotel. Ideas, backgrounds, and opinions were exhibited in insightful speeches, and I was there to see it all. The United States Senate Youth Program was an experience like no other. Never had I seen so many accomplished high school upperclassmen convene to discuss the most pressing issues and to propose solutions through activism and diverse thoughts.

As I sat down for our first ceremony, the realization of the significance of an event like this came to me. Not only was I one of two in my state selected to partake in a behind-the-scenes tour of our nation's capital, but I also was given indispensable leadership tools to organize grassroots movements for any cause I felt passionate about. Similar to what Senator Joe Manchin III of West Virginia suggested, Washington Week was not only for me. This initiative was for the thousands of other citizens back home who have lost faith in our government. He mentioned that, "People will not care about how much you know until they know how much you care." Through my experience in many youth organizations, it seems that the government has sparked skepticism amongst communities because it is perceived to lack a genuine face. Or, perhaps, most assume that misunderstanding about political practices equates to a lack of transparency. However, contrary to popular belief, the people of Washington are in fact relatable, and human beings as well. This underlying conviction was instilled in me when Secretary of the Senate, Julie Adams, said the most important thing to be successful in this arena was to "stay humble because the people you meet on the way up will be the people you meet on the way down." Whatever the case, I sensed an amazing reception from our guest speakers, ranging from the Senate Historian to the President of the United States.

In light of recent racial tensions in America, the Parliamentarian of the Senate, Elizabeth MacDonough, brought light to the subject by reinforcing the idea that there should be "more people of color" in government in order to better represent the ever-changing fabric of demographics. On the same note, the Department of Justice's Acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Vanita Gupta, talked about the extensive work she had led and oversaw in my home state of Texas to eradicate the disenfranchisement of minority voters. In a more global focus, President of the World Bank, Jim Yong Kim explained that his mission was to make sure the underdeveloped periphery has a "chance to make it to the top" to alleviate the wealth gap.

The electrifying ambiance of the United States Senate Youth Program filled me with excitement to be in presence of other like-minded students that sought to revolutionize the world as we know it. Standing in the monumental East Room of the White House, a vibrant man with an infectious personality greeted me and my colleagues. After listening to the inspiring words of President Obama, I felt empowered, but was reminded to "worry more about what you want to do rather than what you want to be." This same idea was echoed at the Supreme Court as Justice Stephen Breyer remarked he "was at the right place at the right time" when nominated to serve his current position. But regardless of the job one ends up pursuing it is important to "stay on the payroll to do the job to the best of our ability." For some, the sky is definitely not the limit because Director of NASA, Charles Bolden, familiarized us with the revamp in innovation for science, space, and technology. Ultimately, the myriad of insights shaped throughout the course of the week and our lives were voiced in the USSYP 2015 Student Town Hall hosted by Brian Lamb on C-SPAN.

Upon meeting the nation's most promising students, I was truly humbled and exhilarated at the sight of an illuminating future for our country. Recurring images of my dreams and aspirations permeated my thoughts as the day progressed. My underlying motivation has been strengthened. I witnessed not only the power of words but also the discovery of my own passions in public policy. It awakened my senses, crystallized my mind, and, perhaps most importantly, humbled me in an arena where egos can be as large as the problems we attempt to solve through our discourse. I am no longer just another high school student with a malleable and cloudy mind. I am a delegate, a problem solver, and, most importantly, a leader. Developing these life skills is an invaluable asset as I strive to become a leader in public service and thanks to the Hearst Foundations I have started to forge this goal.