

Steven Higgins, AL - 2016

The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was quite simply the best experience of my life. From the time I walked into the Montgomery Regional Airport, I began engaging with some of the brightest minds in this country, and I am thankful for every minute of it.

I was nervous before I arrived at The Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C., and my delayed flight out of Montgomery and subsequent sprint through the Atlanta airport did nothing to ease this anxiety. However, as soon as I stepped onto the airplane and started talking to the other United States Senate Youth Program delegates, my nervousness evaporated. Every delegate was incredibly personable, and we found ourselves talking about issues ranging from campaign finance reform - a group favorite - to whether Coke is synonymous to soda. These conversations were intellectually stimulating while also having the levity to yield some excellent inside jokes. I was not expecting to begin the majority of my conversations by saying "suh" or "who up?" I can definitely say this USSYP class had character, but the delegates also had the passion to ask difficult questions and demand complex answers. I loved this passion, and I was ecstatic to be among teenagers who were just as politically engaged as I am. Honestly, the one aspect of USSYP that influenced me more than any other was my interaction with the other delegates. I made some fantastic friends, and I cannot wait to see what they will do in the future.

Of course, the trip itself was extraordinary! The Hearst Foundations planned the perfect trip for a political nerd like myself. We were given the opportunity to visit Mount Vernon, the Newseum, the Capitol, the White House, the Supreme Court building, and the State Department, just to name a few. I had not had the opportunity to visit many of these buildings, so it was amazing to see and learn about the history which had occurred inside each of them. Along with the buildings, we visited monuments such as the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Memorial, and the Martin Luther King Memorial. I loved reflecting on the many changes which have occurred throughout our country's history and the men and women who advocated for these changes or even lost their lives attempting to enact them.

Besides visiting numerous monuments and historic buildings, we were given the opportunity to interact with speakers I only dreamed I would be able to meet. From President Obama to Ruth Bader Ginsburg to Jonathan Capehart, the list goes on and on; these reputable people were all present to encourage us to give back. They emphasized the importance of public service and recounted the individual events which led them to their place in life. President Obama's struggles as a community organizer in Chicago and Ruth Bader Ginsburg's difficulty finding a job out of law school just because she was a woman struck home with me and emphasized the continuing need for progress and people to push our country forward. Before the trip, I had considered politics as a future career, but the relentless barrage of negative media fueled my ever growing cynicism. My trip to Washington, D.C. showed me that there were actual people struggling to overcome the negativity surrounding Washington and that I wanted to join them.

While all of the speakers were amazing and influenced me in one way or another, my favorite speaker had to be Dr. Piers Sellers. Of course, I am not often able to listen to a climate change presentation by an astronaut, but his wit and knowledge about climate change are what truly stood out to me. I will always remember that the enemy of scientific progress is "the Kardashians" and that planes are just "aluminum wrapped around a theory." I will also take Dr. Sellers' advice to be optimistic about the Paris Climate Change Treaty because it sets the tone for future action against climate change. I was truly inspired by his presentation and learned a lot about humanity's impact on the earth and what we are doing to fix the problem. When I returned home, I was saddened to learn that he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. His research has done so much good, and I am glad to have heard him talk. In fact, I have listened to his presentation multiple times online. I am also very impressed by the delegates' response to his illness. Many of the delegates took the time to write and send Dr. Sellers cards thanking him for his presentation and service to the world. I am honored to be a part of this group of compassionate and thoughtful leaders.

The United States Senate Youth Program was truly an incredible experience, and leaving all of my new friends at the end of the week was very difficult. I loved every minute of Washington Week. I really appreciate the opportunities that The Hearst Foundations, all of the military mentors, and the other staff members provided us. The week would not have been the same without their constant guidance. I will always remember Washington Week, and I know my experiences at the conference changed my life for the better.