

Emily Lu, CA – 2016

I boarded the plane back to California as the sun began to rise, casting a brilliant light of purples, pinks, and yellows over the horizon. It was a sunrise, but to me it felt like a sunset of the life-changing experiences all amalgamated into a six-day sequence that had flown by much too fast. I returned to a city, a school, a group of peers that had all stayed the same, and it was made more and more obvious the degree to which my week in Washington had transformed my perspective.

I had arrived in Washington, the last of all delegates, carrying with me two suitcases, two backpacks, a jittery excitement, and a sense of uncertainty. Would I be welcomed here? Would I fit in with the other delegates? Would I belong in this group of young leaders? I discovered my answer even before hearing Senator Gardner's affirmation: "You don't need to *act* like you belong—you *do* belong." Not only did I feel at ease with my fellow delegates, but I also found that I learned as much from them as I did from Senator Hirono, or Assistant Secretary of State John Kirby, or *Washington Post* journalist Jonathan Capehart.

With the combination of interactions with my fellow delegates and some of our national leaders, I was left with an indelible desire to pursue a future in public service. For the rest of the week, I struggled with the question I faced at every turn: "So what was your favorite part of today?" My attempts to settle on one specific speaker of activity soon turned into summaries of the entire day's events. With each speaker, I eagerly attempted to encapsulate their words, their passion, and their message in the form of memory and of written word. Utterly enchanted by the machinery of Washington, the moving and working parts of its residents and workers, I found myself clinging to each minute as it passed.

There is an unnamed element in the essence of Washington. I hear tourists mention it: "There's just *something* about that city." I tried to pinpoint this as I contemplated each of the engraved quotes at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, as I craned my neck to gaze at the physical depiction of Martin Luther King Jr's figurative eminence in our society, as I felt numbed by the rows and rows of white stones at Arlington National Cemetery. The heart of our nation lies at our fingertips when we visit D.C., and it is empowering.

I achieved a personal realization of American values combined with a new perception of the government through the appreciation of Washington's physical structures and human bedrock. Listening to our speakers, I sensed a certain commonality that laid in their composure, their words, and their attitude. It is a sense of determination, of passion, and of dedication. It's a spirit that cannot be described, for it brings a new sentiment to each being that it pervades. It fills you with a confidence that ignites your seemingly quixotic aspirations and transforms them into intense realization of the ever-existing devotion to your peers, your society, and your nation. These speakers, I realized, share this intensity, which ultimately fueled each of their own paths to public service.

They stood by their beliefs, and worked to strengthen the existence of these ideologies in our society. They believed in their ability to make positive change. They believed in the resilience of the American government.

Their fires ignited our kindling. I saw in them what I hope to achieve, and what I am sure my fellow delegates will achieve. I am overwhelmed by the immense faith in our future held by the USSYP staff, military mentors and The Hearst Foundations. I now have an unwavering confidence that our generation will not only meet, but will exceed their expectations.