

Aanand Shah, DoDEA – 2016

My name is Aanand Shah, and I'm a delegate from DoDEA. No, that's not a new state - it's the name of the school system designed for military personnel domestic and international. Two delegates to the United States Senate Youth Program are selected from DoDEA-Overseas, and I'm privileged to say I was one of them.

Okinawa, Japan is a tiny island south of Japan, and is home to 100,000 Americans mixed with one million gentle and respectful Okinawans. Here, the majority of political debate is Air Force vs. Navy and where the island's best beach is. Politics have still not found a true niche here, be it in a high school government class or in a hangar. Thus, politically-minded individuals like me are fed only a curated, filtered stream of information through government-run TV networks. For me, learning about political happenings and inner workings could only be done through meticulous internet perusal or careful scanning of newspapers. Until USSYP.

I experienced quite a few "shocks" during my time in the District of Columbia. It wasn't just a culture shock - I hadn't been to the U.S. in about three years - but also an unexpected influx of knowledge. I learned about the influence of media from the prominent Jeffery Herbst, history of the Senate from, well, the Senate historian, and how America's vault works from the archivist of the United States. All incredible people, whom I wouldn't have known about or learned from if it hadn't been for USSYP. Certainly, I gained a wealth of knowledge and new perspectives from prominent speakers like President Obama and Justice Ginsburg, but I valued every speaker just as much because their unique paths to success taught me that I can forge my own. At such an uncertain yet important time in life, I learned a much needed lesson - I don't need to follow anyone's template for success. I consider this my most important takeaway from my time in USSYP. We often hear that we must follow our dreams and be ourselves, but I now finally got to see people in positions I can only dream of who got there by doing exactly that.

I could discuss the myriad of incredible speakers and dignitaries for ages, but I wouldn't be doing the program justice if I didn't mention the invaluable influence of the mentors and fellow delegates. I didn't expect to learn life lessons from a bunch of high schoolers, much less build indelible friendships and memories. The collection of people USSYP brings together allowed me to meet people with dreams as big as mine and IQs much higher. Additionally, the military mentors gave me an incredible way to meet people who embody exactly who I hope to be. I plan to join the Air Force, so meeting such an incredibly accomplished group has served as a strong guiding light in what was a confusing and unclear senior year.

As a (now) alumni of USSYP, I leave with incredible memories, goals, and connections. This essay does not nor cannot do them all justice - it just serves as a humble attempt to recount my phenomenal experience at the 2016 United States Senate Youth Program.