

Nii Soja Torto, FL – 2016

As I scanned my notes from Washington Week a few days after departing the nation's capital, I came across a strong quotation — “you don't know what's out there until you stumble across it.” I paused, dumbfounded by the wise words of Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough. For a brief second, I had a moment of clarity. The post-USSYP shock from my experiences at Washington Week subsided, and for the first time, I was able to really reflect on what Washington Week meant to me.

Never in my life have I met so many intelligent and passionate individuals. Growing up in a rather homogenous suburban society, I never truly realized how isolated I was in my exposure to differing opinions. The discussions I have always had at home with my classmates about the problems facing the nation and the world in no way can compare to the serious intellectual exchanges I had with my fellow USSYP delegates at Washington Week. From the possibility of a federal mandate of vaccines to intriguing discussions of what it means to be trans-racial, I learned more in the span of a week at USSYP than I could have in the span of months elsewhere. We sat together in the same rooms, at the same tables, listening intently to each distinguished speaker. The pen marks on our hands, our sore wrists, our unwavering concentration, and our copious pages of notes attest the amount of information we absorbed.

Looking back at our program, I still struggle to believe how much we were able to do and accomplish. While the highly anticipated crowd favorites like President Barack Obama and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg undoubtedly and predictably surpassed my already exceedingly high expectations, it was the speakers I least looked forward to that most piqued my curiosity. All week, we conversed, listened to, and questioned speakers from across disciplines and areas of our bureaucracy. Considering the fact that the United States is in an intriguing presidential election year, it was the perfect time to be in Washington, D.C. There were endless topics to discuss and countless opinions and views to be offered, but one topic that was consistently evoked was the effect the modern press and media have had on society. Often, one hears the negative and occasionally, the positive aspects of the effect of the press on contemporary society's political arena. However, the coveted opportunity I had to hear Jonathan Capehart, *Washington Post* journalist, speak gave me a new perspective. His opinions on the Snowden scandal, his experience as an opinion writer, and his genuine advice greatly enriched my life and my USSYP experience.

In short, my unrivaled experience at the United States Senate Youth Program changed my life. I am now committed to dedicate my life to public service in some capacity! There is not one single speaker or event on the USSYP program for 2016 that I did not benefit from. From the charisma and passion in the voice of USSYP alumnus, Senator Cory Gardner, to the solemnity at the Tomb of the Unknowns, I have taken so much from my USSYP experience. To say that the United States Senate Youth Program is “the experience of a lifetime,” is truly an understatement. In fact, even the food was unbelievably delicious! I cannot even express in words how thankful I am for The Hearst Foundations' tireless support of each and every one of my fellow delegates and me. It is so easy to overlook all the planning and work that went into Washington Week 2016, because of how smooth and professional everything was. I am eternally indebted to The Hearst Foundations; the USSYP staff, especially Ms. Guilford and Ms. De Smet; our photographers; our military mentors, especially my mentor, Captain Jeff Dierling of the Marine Corps; and everyone else involved in the 54<sup>th</sup> annual U.S. Senate Youth Program for changing my life. Stumbling across certain perspectives and ideas for the first time in my life in the presence of our country's esteemed leaders and my outstanding fellow delegates has inspired me. With the tools we have gained from Washington Week, I have no doubt in my mind that my fellow delegates and I will make this country and the world a better place someday!