

There are no words that can express how much I have been thankful for representing the state of Hawaii in Washington, D.C. as one of the two student delegates for the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). It was an amazing opportunity to meet with some of the nation's top leaders, such as Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Senator Cory Gardner (R-CO), Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI), NASA astronaut Piers Sellers, Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz, and even President Barack Obama. We had many chances to engage in different conversations with the other 103 delegates from all across the nation. It was refreshing to be able to discuss political issues facing our nation with 103 other students, who understand and have a basic background about the political arena. It was through these discussions that we broadened our perspectives and on a personal note, I learned more about the other 49 states and shared all about where I came from – the Pacific island state of Hawaii.

We started the week with a former chief judge from Oklahoma named Robert Henry, who spoke to us about the new generation and how the judiciary branch was the least dangerous of the other branches. He spoke to us as a USSYP alumnus from Oklahoma back in 1971 and he shared how we were lucky to have been selected for this program. We then met Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a Supreme Court justice, who was admired by many of my fellow student delegates; she is the oldest woman serving on the Supreme Court today, at the age of 84, she still sits as one of the strongest proponents for women's rights. She mentioned how she was a "doer," especially when it came to women's rights – fighting every day for women all across our great country. The next day we went to NASA Goddard Space Flight Center and learned all about NASA and their goals and aspirations of going to Mars and inhabiting the planet. They are working to tackle climate change and shared that they are funded by a multi-billion dollar budget. Next, we were on the way to the White House, ready to speak and meet with the president himself, Barack Obama; passing four security checkpoints was worth it. I had the amazing opportunity to shake the president's hand, stand in front of him while he spoke, and listen to his words of advice to young leaders, who hope to be in his shoes someday. He spent over an hour with us; we were standing the whole time, but everything he said inspired me personally to continue a career in public service and serving others in various ways. We ended that day with speaking with Senator Mazie Hirono from Hawaii. She shared her story and her way into public service and how she had to overcome barriers to make her way to the United States Senate. She emigrated from Japan on the *President Cleveland* and set sail for Hawaii – where she attended Kaimuki High School and moved on the University of Hawaii at Manoa and law school at Georgetown University.

For the entire week, we enjoyed various luxuries, like staying in The Mayflower Hotel, being secured by program security staff, riding in luxurious bus coaches, and feasting on some of the fanciest meals, especially coming from Hawaii. We visited almost every single national monument, went into some of the most secured federal buildings, and even attended the National Symphony Orchestra in the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The day agendas were packed, filled with different things, and we ended days with the company of my fellow USSYP delegates. Having a chance to meet with other people and relate to each other's personal life aspirations was interesting, with some of us considering a run for governor, Congress, the U.S. Senate, or even commander in chief of this country – president. It was the best part of the program because you don't always get that chance to meet people like the ones in this program. If I had the chance to share these experiences with other students, who share the same passion as I do, I would tell them that this program doesn't dare disappoint. It provides students just like myself, the chance to see our government at work, to experience what it means to serve, and learn lessons from all leaders from all aspects of public service. I learned the importance of being focused on what I want to do and making it happen. From the different talks I had with different student delegates, there was one thing that resonates within the group. It was that we were all determined to make a difference and by doing so, make others believe that they have a chance at success, wherever they may end up. I was proud to have been part of a group of student leaders from all across the nation and provide inspiration and motivation for others. This was a pivotal moment for me because I thought I knew it all but coming to Washington, D.C. our nation's capital, and experiencing our government working first hand was a chance for me to better understand government and politics.

In addition to all the different experiences that occurred during the program, we ended the week with an evening presentation of the colors from the United States Marine Corps and Brass Quintet, where they enlightened us with some music relating to our nation's heritage. This last evening dinner was a momentous moment in many ways, including some sadness because it was the end of the program. We were amazed at how much we got the chance to talk to each other and learn about each other on a personal level. As a proud USSYP alumnus, I feel more confidence in taking on the challenges that I will soon face, such as college, and pursuing a career in public service and can only say that I am beyond grateful for the USSYP!