

Beau Ragland, IA – 2016

My experience in the United States Senate Youth Program was phenomenal. The seven days I spent in the capital of our nation will go down as being one of the best weeks of my life. I was incredibly proud to represent Iowa and be among my fellow accomplished delegates from across the nation. It was amazing to be able to experience firsthand and learn more about the highest levels of our government. From visiting the White House and meeting the president to conversing with my senators, the experiences I had in D.C. will stay with me forever.

One of the best parts about the program was the unique opportunity to be among the other delegates. Every student there was one of the best and brightest that our country has to offer. Just engaging in conversation with the other delegates and hearing their stories was worth the trip to D.C. Everyone there was exceptionally gifted and accomplished, and listening to everyone's stories about how they got to the program was very interesting. I know that some of the connections I made will develop into lifelong friendships.

Another special part of the program was the opportunity to be in a "family" with other delegates, each being headed by a military mentor. Military mentors are decorated members of one of the branches of the armed services. My mentor, Major Juan Santiago, led me along with seven other delegates. From briefing us on the day's plans to giving us advice on how to behave ourselves in a professional environment, Major Santiago helped guide us through the week. It was also interesting to hear from him about all the opportunities the military has to offer. He further built my respect for our military and helped create a brother-like bond between our nine-person group of guys. I developed more in-depth friendships with everyone within it. This military mentor family was one of the best parts of the week.

Eating dinner in the National Archives was one of my favorite parts of the week. While eating my delicious meal, I could look up and see the homes of the Declaration, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. The dinner was followed with a special speech by Senator Hirono of Hawaii, one of the co-chairs of the program. Hearing the senator's story about her immigration to America and her path to success was very inspirational. It was an amazing night and I will remember the experience for the rest of my life.

Another moving experience was making the journey to Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington. While walking through his home overlooking the Potomac, I realized just how significant the house was. Founding Fathers regularly visited and conversed with Washington over the same floor that I was walking on. Later that day, participating in a wreath-laying ceremony at Washington's grave and hearing how Washington willingly gave up power throughout his life made me think of just how special he was to our nation. Most men would have grabbed for power after the war of independence, but Washington stepped away from the spotlight and allowed our country to develop. He did the same after serving as president, and these actions have led to country to being the great nation it is today.

Overall, Washington Week was truly incredible. There is nothing like it anywhere else – the level of access we had to the inner workings of our federal government is unprecedented. I am incredibly grateful to The Hearst Foundations for making the program possible. The USSYP grooms the future leaders of our nation, and I am proud to be one of the program's alumni.