

Mark Jerome, ID – 2016

The emotions that filled my mind the moment I heard that I had been selected as a delegate for the United States Senate Program were emotions that I had never felt so intensely. I received a phone call from my mom telling me a massive packet had arrived for me. In the words of Colorado Senator Cory Gardner, I thought, “they wouldn’t have sent me a big packet if I didn’t get selected.” When I finally opened that packet I was speechless because of the opportunity that was presented before me. I thought, “This is too good to be true,” and then it was. I saw that the dates conflicted with my state’s basketball tournament. My stomach dropped. I had to choose between meeting the president, among many other incredible things, and possibly playing in state championship game my senior year. After much thought and consideration, I chose to accept the wonderful opportunity in Washington, D.C.

My week in Washington, D.C. was an eye-opening experience, one that challenged my stances on issues in many different ways. Meeting delegates from all other parts of the United States was one of the most insightful things I have ever done. I heard viewpoints that I have never heard before, ideas that had never struck my mind, but above all I met kids that had different thoughts on how to keep America the best nation in the world.

One of the best moments of my life was seeing the president of the United States walk into the room, just feet away from me. This was the most surreal moment of the entire trip. Only a few people have the opportunity to be so close to the president and hear him speak in person. I will never forget the words that he shared with us.

Visiting Arlington Cemetery was the most touching experience of the entire trip. Driving past row after row of white gravestones was a bone-chilling experience that will stay vivid in my mind forever. Seeing each individual grave and realizing that for every one of those, a soldier gave the ultimate sacrifice for our country. This was by far the most inspiring moment of the entire trip. It made me think about how if these men and women were willing to lay down their lives for us, then the rest of us should be striving to work just as hard to keep this country great and free. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was an experience that struck deep inside me. Every single person had the utmost respect for what was happening. The wreath ceremony brought tears to many of us and reminded us that freedom isn’t free.

This week in Washington, D.C. will have a lasting impact on me and has reminded me why I am interested in public service and policy making. I heard from numerous influential people that I never dreamed of seeing in person, visited the highest-level places in the United States, and was reminded of my deep-hearted patriotism.

I could not be more thankful for The Hearst Foundations, United States Senate, and the USSYP staff for the opportunity that they provided us with. Their generosity will pay off greatly down the road when many of these young Americans are making differences within our country. I cannot express enough my gratitude for this opportunity. Thank you for such a terrific experience that has changed my life forever.