

Hari Kumar, MA – 2016

"Don't be cynical."

This was President Obama's parting statement to the United States Senate Youth Program Class of 2016, and it certainly was a message that resounded with all of the delegates in the room. Over the past few decades, many Americans have lost all confidence in the political system (on the local, state, and national level), making it much more challenging to get people interested in the workings of our government. It isn't uncommon in many elections to see voter participation to fall below 1/3 of the eligible population, and politicians are consistently rated high on "America's Most Disliked Professions." But, after meeting with 103 other bright, confident student leaders all across the country during Washington Week, I am certain that the future of politics will be rid of cynicism and hatred.

All throughout USSYP, fun and intelligible conversations could be discerned, with infinite memories made during the entire process. Even on my bus ride from Reagan International Airport to the beautiful Mayflower Hotel, a fun discussion about the Iowa caucuses entertained all of us, who were already just excited to be in our nation's capital. The meals were definitely the time when the most lively and positive discourse flowed throughout the ballroom; with so many politically-inclined minds all together in one space, the debates over immigration, American exceptionalism, and President Obama's suit choice consumed us all. The things that I'm sure all of us will remember most about USSYP 2016 were the meaningful conversations that we had with our peers.

The days were always filled with interesting speakers, tours, and presentations, creating the most fun and jam-packed D.C. trip I've ever been on. Our visit to Mount Vernon and the Newseum to start out the program gave us a glimpse at the inherent eclectic nature of Washington. Ending at Arlington National Cemetery and a meaningful flag-folding ceremony in the Mayflower Ballroom during the evening reminded us all of the respect our public servants deserve. In the middle of all of that, we casually met Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, ate dinner in the middle of the National Archives, and heard President Obama make some political jokes for about half an hour. And I think that most of the delegates didn't really realize how unbelievable it was that we were having these experiences. It was truly humbling to return to my hometown in Massachusetts (sadly away from my fellow USSYP family) and speak about visiting the Capitol Building or eating breakfast with the Secretary of Energy, with all of my friends just amazed by how much this program offered us. When remembering our time at USSYP, I hope that we will all take a moment to take in how cool those meetings really were, understanding that The Hearst Foundations and the U.S. Senate provided a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us.

My favorite part of the Senate Youth Program was that it appealed to all types of people. Although I am very interested in politics and public service, my heart first belongs to science and mathematics, where my primary passion resides. But even with that undying interest in what seems like the opposite of what USSYP would foster, many experiences were tailored to that interest. Our visit to the NASA Goddard Center was unforgettable; hearing from Dr. Piers Sellers, an astronaut for the organization who is also bravely fighting through pancreatic cancer, inspired me to get more involved with organizations like NASA. USSYP helped me solidify my interest in environmental and climate science by allowing me to listen to some of the most respected individuals in the field. I'm sure that my fellow delegates had similar experiences with their own ambitions.

USSYP successfully brought together not only extremely bright students, but also extremely caring students. Every delegate who came to Washington, D.C. during the first week of March for the program was involved in helping their community, with a deep desire to change the world.