

Meghana Bharadwaj, MO – 2016

It's about 9:30 pm.

Zena Meyer (CA), Hannah Robbins (AR), Major Breezy Long (our military mentor) and I are standing outside of our rooms just chatting about the wonderful day we had just had: meeting President Obama, hearing the inspiring feminist words of Senator Hirono, having dinner at the National Archives 20 feet from the original Constitution.

Then, an older man from the end of the hall walks through our little cluster and smiles at us. He stops and asked us where we went, why we were dressed so professionally, what we were doing here, what program we were with etc. At first, Zena, Hannah, and I exchange questioning looks. But eventually, we explain that we are with the U.S. Senate Youth Program and we spend a week meeting public officials, recounting the events of the day as an example. Major Long explains her role working with intelligence as a member of the Air Force and as our military mentor. He tells us that he is a veteran, having gone to West Point and serving. He highlights some of his experiences that we listened and appreciated.

As an activist for veterans' rights in my own community, I ask him what advice he has for helping homeless veterans in our country. He becomes passionate as he discusses the issues of identifying them in the first place. We listened carefully and intently, while adding our own ideas and commentary to the mix. After about 20 minutes, the man said goodnight and left us, smiling.

It was clear that we had made that man's day. He was so enlightened by our young and active interest. At first, even though that man seemed creepy, possibly interested in younger women, he truly showed us that first impressions are often incorrect. As he walked away that night with a smile on his face, I was so happy to make a genuine impact in his life although it may have been a little one. The four of us possibly restored his faith in the younger generation.

Major Long told me to never give up that curiosity and affection.

That was the moment I realized that Senate Youth was not so much about the experience as it was a gathering. It was a gathering of people across the country who were genuinely curious about the country's issues and their solutions and who were truly affectionate for the people around them. Just minutes before that conversation, I had been raving about how President Obama called on me to ask a question, but at that moment, it seemed insignificant. All that mattered to me was the people I was around because I could not think of humans I connected, understood, and loved more.

One of my old friends once told me, "Certain people will forever be programmed in the love section of my heart."

I thought it was an interesting comparison; usually we think of our brain, not our hearts, being programmed into sections. But after Senate Youth, I understood the meaning of what she said. The delegates, military mentors, and members of The Hearst Foundations will forever be programmed into the love section of my heart. The insight my genius fellow delegates and the exceptional military mentors provided me are one of a kind. I learned more in one week with them than I have in my 12 years of school.

But I didn't just learn about proper etiquette, the obscure job of an archivist, the policy interests of my peers, the efforts of current public officials to make positive change, the creation of the Jim Webb Telescope, or the name of beyond-fancy vegetarian food dishes.

I learned about humanity, morality, and citizenship. From our military mentors who dedicated their time and efforts for the betterment of others and ourselves, to our public officials who represent our country's best interest to The Hearst Foundations and all of its members who nurture and encourage our visions to my fellow delegates who are the greatest humans of my generation, I walked out of The

Mayflower Hotel on March 12 at 5:30 in the morning with many tears in my eyes and many feelings in my heart, the biggest of which was inspiration. I came into Senate Youth with a passion, a vision, a curiosity, as I'm sure many of my fellow delegates did as well, but I left with a greater passion, a bigger vision, and a thirstier curiosity to the problems and solutions of the country and the world.

I still cannot fathom what I've done in my life to be blessed with such a gathering. I am sincerely grateful to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, The Hearst Foundation and all its accompanying members and staff, and my fellow delegates for giving me the greatest, most impactful week of my life.

You know, they say you smile at your phone when your crush texts you, but these days, my mother doesn't even have to ask - my crushes are my fellow USSYP delegates.

Senate Youth was the exact inspiration, motivation, and eye-opening experience I needed as I approach the next phase of my life. I cannot put into words how much better I feel as a human being about myself, my generation, my country, and OUR future.

I finally know for sure that, like Senator Gardner said, "We will always have the ability to carry big rocks."