

Miranda Cross, NV – 2016

When I first found out I was selected as a delegate for the 2016 U.S. Senate Youth Program, I thought it was a mistake. While I am politically engaged in my community, and love following politics, I have no desire to be a politician or run for public office at this point. From January, my anticipation and my fear of being the only delegate out of 104 that didn't want to be a politician grew exponentially, until I finally stepped off the bus and into the lobby of The Mayflower Hotel. I was immediately greeted by a Nevada USSYP alumnus, who after hearing I was interested in computer science, introduced me to a software engineer, another USSYP alumnus. Later that night, I was introduced to my mentor group, and much to my surprise, four out of the eight delegates I was paired with also did not want to become politicians, but rather wanted to make an impact in science, medicine, and the nonprofit sector. Among this small group of multifaceted, talented girls, I knew I had found my place at Washington Week.

Looking back, I severely underestimated how much effort The Hearst Foundations put into finding diverse activities to suit every type of student at Washington Week. While in D.C., I met everyone from scientists working on a multibillion dollar telescope, to the president, and almost every profession in between. On the same day we met President Obama (or Tuesday, March 8th to everyone else) we also went to NASA's Goddard Spaceflight Center. Here we heard from Dr. Piers Sellers, NASA's Deputy Director of Sciences and Exploration, and a former astronaut. Dr. Sellers amazed me; he was direct and to the point about climate change, and had real, solid evidence to prove his points. When asked about climate change denial, he said simply, "you cannot argue with the facts." In short, Dr. Sellers was everything a scientist should be, and showed me that it is possible to combine a love of politics with science.

Hearing from Jonathan Capehart, a writer for the *Washington Post*, was another highlight of Washington Week, because I first found my interest for politics by following news sites (including the *Washington Post*) on Twitter. Mr. Capehart's message was both inspiring and pragmatic — we need to move toward a more inclusive political discourse, and away from the vitriol of campaigning that has dominated this news cycle. He answered our questions with candor and sincerity, acknowledged his biases as an opinion journalist, and didn't shy away from discussing deeply partisan issues. He also shared some enduring words of wisdom in this age of 140-character headlines: "read before you Tweet." As social media becomes deeply ingrained in our political discourse, we can all do well to listen to Mr. Capehart and do enough research to form opinions of our own and become knowledgeable citizens.

Though I'm sure every other delegate will talk about it, meeting President Obama was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and even more so for myself because I was able to ask the president a question during the question and answer session. It astounds me that the USSYP delegates are able to meet with the president every year; it truly shows the immense effort that The Hearst Foundations put into making Washington Week a unique, prestigious experience. When speaking to us, the president offered words of advice that all 104 delegates can use: "know what you want to do, not what you want to be." His message hit home with me, because I know that whatever field I go into, I want to help people. The president also answered every question with honesty and sincerity, and spoke to us like adults. My question — "did you anticipate taking as many executive actions in your presidency as you have taken" — was met with a carefully thought out, in-depth response where the president talked about everything from immigration to gun control. I am honestly still kind of in shock, even after a month, that I was able to meet the president, and I will be forever grateful to The Hearst Foundations for making that possible.

Finally I would like to say thank you. There are so many people that make Washington Week and USSYP happen, and I owe so much to them. To our amazing guest speakers, who took the time to engage in a dialogue with future leaders, I am so grateful. To our military mentors, and specifically Capt. Natalie Meng (U.S. Army) who served as my mentor, thank you for sharing your experiences with me and opening my eyes to the armed services. To all of the USSYP staff who worked all year to make this experience possible, and were generous enough to double their contribution to the nation's future, thank

you. And finally, to William Randolph Hearst, thank you. I don't imagine that he foresaw making a difference in the life of a 17 year old girl from Reno, Nevada but he has, and I will be forever grateful.