

Lillian Lin, OH – 2016

As I sat, trying to catch my breath, after “dancing like there was no Jesus” (as one of the Missouri delegates told me), a quote swam around my mind to the point where it flooded even the smallest nooks and crannies. Katherine Walsingham, the heroine of one of my favorite books, once said, “Love, like everything else in life, should be a discovery, an adventure, and like most adventures, you don’t know you’re having one until you’re in the middle of it.” Although Walsingham was referring to a man, I am referring to an experience. That Wednesday night, I realized I fell in love. With the sweaty best friends that encircled my table. With the skyline of the capital of our country. With the badges of honor that lay upon the uniforms of the bravest men and women. With even the blisters sleeping on my toes that reminded me of the adventures I had trekked. This newfound realization painted a smile on my face. My eyes found another pair, and the owner smiled back at me as though he knew what I had just realized. It seemed he had had the realization earlier that night.

To be brutally honest, I was uneasy to meet the other delegates at first. Although I participated in clubs like Junior State of America and have the current senators memorized on the back of my hand, my main passion is public service. About to meet the 103 most politically inclined students of America, I was afraid of being lost in the midst of anticipated political debates.

This was not the case.

I was part of the first group that arrived at The Mayflower Hotel. As two by two from each state poured into the ballroom, the meeting resembled a reunion between old friends rather than an encounter with strangers. We chattered about our plane flight in between bear hugs and uncontrollable laughter. I became aware my initial fear was impractical as I jumped into debates about serious topics like the presidential election and silly ones about whether Pepsi was communism or not. We bonded over our similarities, respected our differences, and admired each other’s accomplishments. Quoting from one of the most impactful speakers of the week, “You don’t need to act like you belong because you DO belong. You belong in Washington, D.C. You belong in your school. You belong in this great nation.” 1993 USSYP alumnus, Senator Cory Gardner of Colorado, is right. Standing among the delegates, I couldn’t help but think that we belonged together. *Everything* in the future is in our hands and *nothing* can stand in our way. We belong in this generation and are unified with one common goal of preserving our great nation; I wouldn’t pick any other people to be by my side.

Looking back, it is very hard to establish the highlight of my week – every moment was an experience that only a few could say they’ve had. Some may assume that the highlight of my week was asking Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg about her love of opera, as I competitively sing opera. Others say it had to be meeting President Barack Obama, for he spent an hour with us because it was his last year. Others justify that the incredible food should be my highlight, since we had 3 courses for every meal. All the experiences I had throughout the week impacted me greatly, but there was a particular night that stood out from the rest. On Tuesday, we had dinner at the National Archives aside the original Declaration of Independence and Constitution. It was Hawaiian cuisine in honor of our special guest speaker, Senator Mazie Hirono. Despite tasting the best food I’ve ever eaten, this amazing woman captured my attention. An immigrant like my parents, she shared intricate tales of her American success story: anecdotes laced with values of perseverance and visions for the future. In the middle of her speech, she reminded us, “We can all make a difference – whatever station in life, wherever you come from.” She, like myself, is an Asian female with an ambition for public service. The most invaluable gift I received from her was inspiration. The inspiration that I could, someday, also make a difference in the country that I love.

True leaders are often unnoticed, for they take pleasure in working behind the scenes but never boast of their deeds. The staff that put together this program deserves more than the standing ovation we gave them on Friday night. It blows my mind that Program Director Rayne Guilford and Deputy Director Lynn De Smet dedicated a year’s effort into a week for 104 high schoolers. The amount of detail and thought put into this program exceeds everything that I’ve seen. In addition, it was exciting meeting old neighbors Mr. George Irish, who used to live in Ohio, and Mr. Dino Dinovitz, who lived in my very own city

of Dublin! As directors of The Hearst Foundations, I would like to earnestly thank them for doubling the scholarship, for it undoubtedly will be of great help when I start applying to colleges this upcoming fall. Lastly, how could I forget about the military mentors? Major Stephen Cox, though strong in his stature, surprised me with his warm smile and great sense of humor. I could always count on him to make me laugh as we waited in line for events and on the podium. Major Mabis, who threatened to poke my eyes out on the first night (inside joke), promised to even take a bullet for us. The military mentor team is the epitome of what American citizens should strive for, but I want to especially thank Captain Heather Kaiser, my own military mentor. Journalist Jonathan Capehart had advised us to “be mindful of guardian angels”; Captain Kaiser was my guardian angel for the week. From spending her own money to order me special blister band aids to making sure I knew necessary information at all times, I couldn’t ask for a better woman to be my mentor.

To conclude my experience in the 54<sup>th</sup> annual United States Senate Youth Program, I want to dedicate this essay to my fellow delegates. As I mentioned in the beginning, I fell in love with every single one of you. To strange inside jokes that were formed in our group chat to being the most intelligent teenagers that I know, I feel sorry for future delegates as they will never achieve the level of friendship that we have. We managed to create a group chat with every delegate before Washington Week, and our relationship with each other only strengthened as time flew by. The tears rolling down my face on Saturday not only represented my sadness towards the ending of the program, but also the temporary separation between us. There is no doubt in my mind that we will meet again, as everyone will succeed in their dreams and achieve remarkable things. To the future leaders of America. To the best friends we will forever be. To the goals we will accomplish.

To us.