

Sydney Ross, AL – 2017

As exhausted as I was heading home from Washington, D.C. on March 11, 2017, I wouldn't trade the experience for any amount of sleep. Every moment spent with my fellow delegates, the Military Mentors, the program staff, our esteemed guests, the prestigious speakers, and everyone I encountered during the week was a learning opportunity I am profoundly grateful to have experienced. My time in Washington is something I will cherish for a long time and something I am certain will become even more precious to me as I age and gain knowledge. The opportunity was, as cliché as it sounds, life changing for me and I am honored to have been selected.

I could write pages about mere minutes of my experience, but one experience impacted me so much that it stands out from the rest. Standing in front of the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery moved me more than I can put into words. Senator Cory Booker spoke to the 2017 delegates and said "you drink deeply from wells of freedom...that you did not dig...you cannot pay them back, you have to pay it forward." He was speaking of the sacrifices others have made so that I have the opportunities and rights that I do. Waiting in front of the tomb and watching the guard gave me far more insight than I realized until I reflected upon it later. People have given their lives freely for my security, my freedom, my rights. They didn't know who I was and I will never know all of them, but they hoped that I—or someone like me—would seize the opportunity they'd given and go improve the world for those following behind us, just as they did. Being able to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown was such an honor and I am overwhelmingly thankful that I could experience it. It has truly changed the way I perceive the world and how I behave in it.

I also enjoyed hearing the Surgeon General of the United States speak. Vice Admiral Murthy spoke about how changing very small things can make a large impact on the world and showed that there can be no boundaries when it comes to helping our fellow man. The Surgeon General oversees public health, of all kinds, and I learned that even whether to build sidewalks was something that they would have input on. Walking for 20 or so minutes a day can drastically impact physical health, so something as simple as putting in sidewalks — not something I traditionally associated with the title of Surgeon General — would allow people to improve their lives. It was inspiring to hear from someone who began their work for the betterment of society at a young age, and was asking us to do the same. Not in a grand gesture or movement, necessarily, but in small acts that could build into a larger change, like sidewalks.

Throughout the week, I kept asking myself why I was selected from the very qualified candidates to represent my state. I felt I was surrounded by people who were far more accomplished and intelligent than I was. I know now that I was selected to be a United States Senate Youth Delegate not only for what I had to offer for others, but also to learn. I learned a lot about myself, and I learned even more about how I could improve and become a better member of society and in turn better the society. I am proud to have been a part of the 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program, and I am excited to take the knowledge I've gained and use it to change the world for the better.