

Amira Chowdhury, CA – 2017

It felt as if the world had stopped around me that moment. The chitter-chatter around the room between the other delegates and their senators suddenly tuned out, and my vision somehow blocked out every moving object. With a whirlwind of emotions running through my veins, my heart began to pound harder and harder. Panic rose like bile in my body. I suddenly couldn't muster up the words to speak. I just stood there, blankly staring up as I watched Kamala Harris, my senator, make her way towards me. My palms were clammy and my fingers began to tie in a knot as she walked closer. A silent "hello" rolled out of my mouth like tumbleweed and within seconds, warm tears flushed down my face like a river escaping a dam as I hugged and welcomed Senator Harris into the Kennedy Caucus Room.

It was during first period APUSH when I got the phone call from Mr. Tom Torlakson, the California state superintendent of Public Instruction, four months ago. With an enthusiastic greeting, Mr. Torlakson informed me that I was one of two delegates selected from the great state of California to attend the 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program. To say that I was astonished to hear the news would be an understatement. For the past two and a half years I have been interacting with city council members, school board officials, city and state legislatures and voters all across Los Angeles and the country to discuss policies and issues concerning Americans. Now, I was going to have the opportunity to meet the most qualified high school students of each state who also had a burning passion for government, and I did not know what to expect.

From failing to work the hotel room key my first night, struggling to remember the names of the 103 other delegates, keeping up with the buddy system, the camera flashes and the amazing food, it has truly been an exhilarating and a refreshing experience immersing myself amongst a group of passionate and driven individuals during Washington week. When I first walked into The Mayflower Hotel lobby, I was thrilled and overwhelmed with uncertainty. "Will I fit in?" "Will the other delegates accept me?" Soon enough, not only did I feel at ease with my fellow delegates, but I also found that I learned as much from them as I did from Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, or Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden, or Senator Heidi Heitkamp.

During our stay in Washington D.C, the program accorded us a unique sense of belonging and intellectual freedom. As I introduced our U.S Senate Historian Betty Koed in the Library of Congress, discussed modern day "yellow journalism" with Dr. Jeffrey Herbst, CEO of the Newseum, and asked questions about health care options with the potential repeal of the Affordable Care Act to Senator Roger Wicker, I achieved a personal realization of American values combined with a new perception of the government through the appreciation of Washington's physical structures and human bedrock.

Though I could easily populate the pages of several novels with words reliving my experiences with the Senate Youth Program, if I were forced at gunpoint to describe Washington Week and its impact upon my public service future in one word, I would choose "*Matrahin*", which means *limitless* in Bengali. The feeling of being inside the U.S Senate and witnessing Senator Bernie Sanders, whom I vigorously campaigned for for over one year, walk by me was beyond surreal. The excitement of discussing with Senator Heitkamp the approved construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline was beyond compelling.

Over the course of Washington Week, I learned that *not belonging* is impossible in American politics. We often fall victim to the partisanship and division all too prevalent in modern political discourse, forgetting the progress our nation has made and the enduring beauty of the American dream. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy reminded us of this hopeful reality with the inspiring proclamation that we "live in a time that is healthier, wealthier, more educated, more tolerant, less violent, and more accepting of each other's differences than ever before." Even though each speaker differed from one another in their political views, they collectively urged us to remain optimistic in the face of increasingly negative media and debates, focusing instead on the positive changes we have made, including tolerance, and the importance of diverse perspectives in politics.

Energized with unfathomable inspiration from Washington Week, I am now fueled to apply all the knowledge I have gained from the United States Senate Youth Program at the grassroots level here in Southern California. As Mr. Mark Shriver, President of Save the Children Action Network, affirmed, "you will never understand what government is really about unless and until you immerse yourself in the system." Armed with courage and resilience, as a servant leader I look forward to continuing my work in community based programs to mentor and help struggling families, pound the pavements and encourage every last voter to cast their ballot in state and city municipal elections and continue to foster discussions with citizens in my community about the issues concerning their lives.

Overall, the depth of inspiration showered upon the delegates of the United States Senate Youth Program by the greatest leaders, both current and future, to ever chart the course of any nation on Earth is nearly indescribable. If there is one thing that I learned from every speaker, Military Mentor, delegate and staff, it is to never doubt the power of a few committed member to plant revolutionary ideas and bring social quixotic changes in the lives of many. Thank you United States Senate Youth Program and The Hearst Foundations for giving me this incredible opportunity and allowing me to witness our national government at work for a week.