

Emily Sullivan, CT – 2017

The day I was called down to my principal's office and told that I would be a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was the beginning of an incredible journey. On that day, I joined a group of talented, passionate individuals who inspired me every day of Washington Week, and continue to inspire me still. The day I found out, I instinctively knew I was one of the lucky few who would get to take part in what I believe to be the best program available to high school students.

Coming from New England, I live in what I would consider to be a fairly liberal bubble, and I haven't had many opportunities to converse with people of diverse ideological backgrounds. In Washington, I got the chance to talk to people who were far-right conservatives, socialists, and everywhere in between. Each delegate I spoke with was not only knowledgeable and well spoken, but also kind, and open minded. These conversations inspired me beyond words and assured me that, although our country is currently experiencing extreme polarization, there is a generation of intelligent and passionate individuals ready to step up and contribute their unique talents to the betterment of our nation.

The only thing that came close to being as impressive as my fellow delegates was the schedule set up for us by The Hearst Foundations. There are very few people who can say that they have met the chief justice of the Supreme Court, or the secretary of State, or the president of the United States. I can't imagine that many outside our fortunate group of USSYP delegates have met all of these impressive leaders in the same week. My fellow delegates and I were quite literally put right in the center of the whirlwind that is the D.C. political scene. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson squeezed us in between his first press conference and his first major international diplomatic trip. Senator Cory Booker literally sprinted out of his meeting with us to get to a vote on the Senate floor. In a time when the media tends to paint our country's leaders as self-serving and duplicitous, it was eye-opening to see how far that is from the truth, and to see how hard all of these people are working to steer our country in what they truly believe to be the best direction.

As I reflect on my time in Washington, the memory that stands out most is listening to the speech delivered by Surgeon General Murthy. As someone planning on going into the field of global health, I was very interested in hearing his ideas about how to overcome the health-related challenges facing our nation. However, what was even more interesting was hearing the life advice that this exceedingly successful man had for the 104 teenagers who were staring at him with the utmost admiration. He said exactly the opposite of what I think we all expected to hear. He told us that it's good to experience failure, good to have empty space in your life, and good to cut yourself slack. It is in these emptier times, when your foot is not on the gas pedal speeding you towards a goal, when you are truly able to explore your passions and fully blossom as an individual. I have always known that I want to help others and make a difference in the world, but Dr. Murthy's words reminded me that it's ok for me to take my time figuring out exactly how I want to do that.

I have come out of Washington Week with hundreds of new ideas, 103 new friends, a lifelong mentor, and more patriotism than I ever thought possible. Each and every person involved with the program positively shaped my experience, and made it one I predict will be among the best of my life. So thank you to my fellow delegates for your friendship, to Captain Maggie Seymour for your guidance, and to each speaker for your willingness to meet with us. Most of all, I would like to thank The Hearst Foundations not only for the incredible program you put together or for the 20 best meals of my life, but for the tremendous time and effort you put into cultivating the next generation of American leaders. I am confident that we will make you proud.