

Anuja Pharasi, IA – 2017

I still remember shedding a tear when I heard Surgeon General Vivek Murthy speak for the first time. With a dignified presence, he stood before me, his hands rested on the sleek podium located at the front of the Mayflower Grand Ballroom. With composure, the Surgeon General said, “Each and every person has a deep well of potential within them.” He paused and let the words sink in. In that moment, our eyes met.

Now I’ll be honest, throughout my lifetime, I have been given several words of encouragement. From coaches to teachers, adults have repeated phrases like “You can do it!” and “Keep working hard!” After a certain point, these words lose their meaning and only contribute to my mundane school routine. However, when I arrived at the United States Senate Youth Program, I felt like I had stepped into an alternate universe. My 104 co-delegates and I were treated like kings and queens, served three-course meals and showered with Moleskine notebooks and pens. But, beyond the glamour of The Hearst Foundations’ material generosity, my 104 co-delegates and I were gifted the words of sincerity. The split second my eyes met with Surgeon General Vivek Murthy’s, I felt a way I had never felt before. I felt empowered and important; I felt strong and confident; most importantly, I felt worthy of the honor that was placed upon me: representing Iowa in the 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program. For the first time in my life, someone’s words of encouragement weren’t just a monotonous string of words, but rather, a guiding hand into a lifetime of benevolence and prosperity.

There were several instances throughout the week when I felt as empowered as I had during Dr. Murthy’s speech. Listening to courageous leaders like Senator Heidi Heitkamp and impassioned public servants like Senator Cory Booker sent a wave of passion through me. Their abilities to break barriers and be honest with their constituents were heartwarming. In an era in which the government is actively distrusted and criticized, I learned that such blanket statements must not be placed on the hardworking men and women who strive to serve the people of the United States.

Beyond the many men and women who stood at podiums and spoke with eloquence, there were speakers who proved to be comical as well. For example, when listening to Bob Schieffer’s experiences with journalism, he referred to Tinder. “I might just be a little more hip than ya think”, he said. Giggling, I remember thinking, “*Wow. Did THE Bob Schieffer just mention Tinder? Am I seriously sitting in a room with one of the most esteemed journalists and listening to him rant about an online dating app?*” I remember being in awe of Parliamentarian Elizabeth McDonough’s charming personality, too. “Don’t read the comments on an article about yourself... unless they are from your mom.” As I was learning to become a better leader and to focus on working hard, I was empowered to take time to smell the roses as well. Speakers like Bob Schieffer and Parliamentarian Elizabeth McDonough taught me that the key to a life well lived is a life well balanced.

Memories are wonderful. They are little pockets of gold, encapsulating some of the most beautiful moments in one’s life. Of course, I’ll always carry my memories of Washington Week with me. I’ll remember laughing with my friends while playing silent football and tearing up the moment I stepped into the White House. However, I won’t be entirely dependent upon these memories, either. The thing is, the United States Senate Youth Program’s impact is lifelong. The friends I made are ones that could someday be bridal party members and cabinet appointees. The things I experienced have influenced my daily actions. The United States Senate Youth Program is a guiding hand, one that opens an unlimited number of doors. I am eternally grateful for USSYP and will carry it with me wherever I go.