

## Gloria Oladipo, IL – 2017

My time with the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. While the trip was truly exemplified by the superior treatment I received from The Hearst Foundations — premium lounging, excellent food, and exclusive access to different monuments I had only ever seen in pictures — what truly distinguished the trip for me was the bonds I created with my Military Mentors and friends, as well as the extensive knowledge I gained, formally through the detailed tours that I received throughout the week and informally through the many conversations I had with my roommate, my mentors, and my fellow delegates.

When I first arrived at the USSYP program, I was nervous, unsure of the environment I would be going into. Like many others, I had read over the website and complimentary material that the USSYP program provided; Also, like many others, I had read over said material multiple times in nervous anticipation of the coming week. Still, I was dubious of the provided packet and website that only seemed to depict smiling, blazer and pencil skirt clad teenagers. I was worried, anxious even, of meeting so many new people with different, and possibly offensive, viewpoints, especially in the politically divisive time that followed the election. However, within the first few moments of my time with my fellow delegates, all my initial worries dissipated. I was met with only kindness and respect, a theme that would continue throughout the week even during the most heated discussions. Because of warm reception I received, I felt encouraged to make friendships, reaching out to many people who I can proudly say are my friends. Not only did the USSYP's cordial environment encourage me to reach out to various people, but it also helped me to grow the friendships I had made, developing them in late night discussions with my peers over hotel-provided cookies and milk. The delegates from Idaho, such as Kathy Min, are people I never would've met otherwise, and are now people I can proudly call my close friends. An additional source of support that USSYP introduced me to was my Military Mentor group and the other Military Mentors I had the pleasure with interacting with during the week. My group offered a constant stream of support during a week that I would describe as extremely exciting, but also overwhelming in some ways. Through all of it, my Military Mentor stood as a reliable source of friendship and our small group will remain a group I treasure forever.

An additional aspect of USSYP that I am extremely grateful for was the ability to have a behind-the-scenes look at many significant buildings and sites. For me, being able to experience Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington but also the site where many slaves endured unimaginable forms of suffering, in tangent with the African American History Museum, a place of celebration for African American victories whilst also acknowledging the history of African American pain, served as a reflective juxtaposition that allowed me to analyze my own position as an African American female. Additionally, visits to buildings such as the United States Institute of Peace allowed myself and other delegates to have discussions on different international conflicts such as the one occurring in Nigeria. These experiences not only added to my overall education during the program, but gave me a chance to voice my intellectual and personal perspective in the conversations that were happening around me.

Overall, my week in Washington, D.C. with the USSYP program served as one of the most memorable times in my life, allowing me to become better educated on the inner workings of the United States government in tangent with my own personal experiences. Thank you so much to the USSYP program as well as The Hearst Foundations for allowing me this tremendous opportunity.