

## Tel Wittmer, KS – 2017

When I departed from my home in the heartland I left nervous and anxious. Little did I know what this program and week had in store for me. As I said goodbye to my father at the airport and embarked on my journey I had no idea that my week in Washington, D.C. would change my life.

When I finally arrived at The Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. I spent the majority of the day getting to know the other delegates. After a couple of hours, I stepped out of my box and really started to enjoy myself. That night I had the opportunity to speak with one of the Kansas delegates from last year's program. He told me what to expect and he continued to give me some advice for the week. The first thing he told me was that I would feel the greatest sense of patriotism experiencing this week of history and growth. Next he strongly suggested that I try and get as much sleep as possible. Finally, he said, "This will be one of the best weeks of your life." When one does not know what is to come, imagination can only help you travel so far. Now having this experience, he was exactly right.

On Sunday, we traveled to the home of George Washington. There could not have been a more perfect way to start off the week. It was at Mount Vernon that I realized how much I truly admire and love history. Because I am passionate about agriculture, my visit at Mount Vernon left an impact on me. George Washington was a pioneer in agriculture and was ahead of his time. There is no doubt how agriculture plays an important part in our lives. It was also fascinating to see that our first president of the United States understood the underlying truths of freedom and America.

Among the many great speakers we had the opportunity to listen to throughout the week, one of my favorites included hearing Senator Heidi Heitkamp speak in the rotunda of the National Archives. In her remarks she made an emphasis on political courage and left me inspired with her love for America and the people she serves.

Wednesday night I was very grateful to meet with my senators from Kansas, but what really made my day was when I took a selfie with Marco Rubio. I will always remember what he asked me, "Wow, do you lift weights?" I smiled and replied a simple, "Yeah." That night I had my first opportunity to show off my wicked dance moves; and yes it was a sight to see.

On Thursday, which was my favorite day of the week, we visited the U.S. Senate chamber. Being an admirer of architecture, I found it intriguing walking through the Capitol building. It was such an awesome and breathtaking experience seeing the Senate chamber in person. C-SPAN just doesn't do it justice. That afternoon we met with both President Trump and Vice President Pence. I felt the gusts of freedom breathe life into the room as they entered. I held back some tears because it was at that moment that I realized I was standing just feet away from the highest elected leader in our nation. That trip to the White House was a very powerful experience and one I will always remember.

On Friday I could not have asked for a better way to end the week. Whether it was the emotional and impactful experience at Arlington National Cemetery, or the best farewell speech ever given by Christian Parker, Friday was a day to remember. That night I was given yet another chance to show off my wicked dance moves. I stayed up all night with all the amazing friends I had made, and made some unforgettable memories.

The three main points of emphasis in this program are Education, Leadership, and Public Service. My week in Washington, D.C., through this program, accomplished each of these areas and overall left me inspired and excited to seek out a career in public service one day. Everyone I met throughout the week including The Hearst Foundations directors, the USSYP staff, The Mayflower Hotel staff, every single outstanding Military Mentor, and each and every one of the other exceptional delegates were absolutely incredible.

Throughout the week I made some really good friends. I will forever cherish the time I spent with the other amazing 103 delegates, my terrific roommates, and my Military Mentor group *aka* The Galapagos Gang. Whether it was waking up at 5:00AM every other morning to go to the hotel gym with my awesome military mentor Captain Gallegos, *aka* Captain Galapagos, or just hanging out with my roommates or some of my newly made friends, the memories I made during the 2017 USSYP Washington week will forever be engraved in my heart and in my mind.

So in the end the alumni delegate that I had talked to the first night was, without a doubt, right about everything. I have never felt a greater sense of patriotism or love for my country than I did during and after my week in Washington, D.C. Sleep did turn out to be very important, yet I did not get enough, but that is something I don't regret. And this week was absolutely one of the best weeks of my life! I am incredibly indebted to The Hearst Foundations, the United States Senate, and the wonderful United States Senate Youth Program staff for making this life-changing week possible. I can say without any hesitation that this week truly changed my life and left an enormous impact on me as a person and as an aspiring leader.