

Joseph Chong, NC – 2017

“It’ll change your life.” Everybody tells you this. Within minutes of our arrival at The Mayflower Hotel, we were meeting with alumni repeating this very line. Yet even over a month after Washington Week, I am still unable to fathom how much my life has changed and will change because of the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP).

As we embarked on our journey in our nation’s capital, there was a distinct wonderment in the events our week entailed. Receiving our agendas when we checked in, we all immediately unfolded our pamphlets, seeing which speakers we would listen to and when. Then we began to meet each other, shaking countless hands, our faces hurting after smiling for so long. Yet none of us could wipe that smile off of our faces knowing we would be meeting the country’s most prestigious figures in politics and public service.

Introducing ourselves to one another, I found it incredibly difficult to find any other juniors besides myself. Speaking with my fellow delegates, I wondered how I was selected for a program filled with students of this caliber. However, as I began to question my qualifications, the other delegates would immediately wonder the same things. This feeling quickly shifted into amity, and all of us were able to understand that we had earned our position as a delegate to the program. The shared humility allowed us to thoroughly enjoy our week without having any feelings of competition (other than sprinting and tripping each other to see Cory Booker).

Words cannot even begin to describe how amazing the agenda was for the program. I never thought I would ever have the opportunity to meet the president, vice president, chief justice of the Supreme Court, and secretary of State in my entire lifetime, let alone in one week. Yet the “big-name” speakers were surprisingly not the most influential speakers in my experience. As one of the delegates from North Carolina, I had the honor of introducing Ms. Debra Wall, the deputy archivist of the United States. Standing on that podium in the building housing our nation’s founding documents humbled me as I stood there holding my U.S. Archives Researcher’s Card with a picture of my freshman self. Beyond the honor of introducing a speaker, it also allowed me to sit with the distinguished guests at the dinner in the Archives rotunda. Yet little did I know that would be the most important meal I would have in my life.

I sat at a table with my fellow North Carolina delegate, Ms. Wall, members of The Hearst Foundations, the North Dakotan delegates, and Senator Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota. Only two seats away from Senator Heitkamp at the table, I felt humbled to be in the presence of a prestigious senator and the Co-Chair for the program. As dinner was served, she prompted a conversation with me, asking me about my interests and career aspirations. I was honest with her, explaining I was interested in practicing politics but unsure because of the stigma surrounding politicians. She asked what type of job I was thinking about pursuing, and I explained to her I wanted to become a lawyer to fight for equitable education. She nodded and responded with a smile that my answer was a perfect path to politics, explaining that I didn’t say I wanted to become a senator or the president; rather, my answer was to serve the people. From that instant, I immediately knew that I wanted to pursue a career in public service and government.

Beyond the life-changing experience with the speakers, this experience has also left me with lifelong friends. Weeks after the end of the program, we have all been seeing and visiting each other, some even thousands of miles away from home. During spring break, I went on college tours, and I was able to see seven of my fellow delegates during my trip. These devoted, lifelong friends are uncommon since you are able to laugh with them, have intellectual discussions with them, and have a good time with them. The bonds we made during our week in Washington are certainly unbreakable, and our unique dynamic will be maintained, even as we meet as USSYP alumni once we’re all gray and wizened.

Reflecting back at my time during Washington Week, we all had different experiences. You may or may not enjoy every single speaker. You may or may not enjoy the extravagant meals that always begin with a salad. You may or may not enjoy having to dress up in formal attire everywhere you go. But I can definitely guarantee this: your week at the United States Senate Youth Program will change your life.