

Ashlen Wright, ND – 2017

Washington Week was one of the best experiences of my life. There were so many wonderful encounters and events that week. I will always cherish the memories and friendships that I have because of the United States Senate Youth Program and The Hearst Foundations. I am also incredibly grateful for the scholarship from The Hearst Foundations, which will help further my education.

The first memorable experience that I had was the alumni reception. It was wonderful to discuss current events and the upcoming week with the impressive USSYP alumni. So many of them offered fantastic insight into their specialties and areas of study. This reception was also amazing because I was able to meet the other 103 delegates that I would share Washington Week with. I was absolutely blown away by how successful, informed, and intelligent they all were. As someone with a passion for politics, the opportunity to debate with knowledgeable peers on current events was incredible. The first of many conversations I had were about classical symphony repertoire, the global economic impact of OPEC's decision to continue selling oil, and the intricate history of the USA's and Russia's treaties and ties! I have never been around so many fellow students with whom I could connect on both an intellectual level and about shared passions for making real world contributions.

Throughout Washington Week I talked with each delegate from all 50 states including Washington, D.C. and the DODEA locations. I learned much from their views about controversial topics, their wide range of experiences and profound insights. My mind was opened beyond any previous expectation and expanded beyond one singular viewpoint. Debating about different topics and conversing about each state's priorities helped me appreciate even more how diverse the American people are. Furthermore, I became more open to opposing opinions through a more in-depth look into the reasoning of those viewpoints.

Almost all of the 2017 delegates have kept in touch and I have made incredible and close friends through this experience. Beyond developing friendships, the United States Senate Youth Program made it possible to hear directly from American and world leaders. I feel incredibly fortunate that Senator Heidi Heitkamp, one of my state's U.S. senators, was a Co-Chair for the USSYP this year. I was so excited to discuss state and national issues with her, and we even shared some laughs. Perhaps my favorite memory from Washington Week was delivering the closing speech after Senator Heitkamp spoke in the Rotunda of the National Archives standing in front of both the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. I will remember that tremendous experience forever, and I am still in awe of the opportunities that I have received through my participation in USSYP. I was also greatly appreciative of the opportunity to meet and speak with Senator John Hoeven of North Dakota. Having spent time with both North Dakota's U.S. senators, I have an enhanced perspective about the relationship between North Dakota and the United States governments.

In addition to meeting the majority of United States senators, we were able to hear from several leaders of specific governmental programs and agencies. One of my favorite speakers was the Surgeon General of the United States. After speaking to us about the preventative measures and actions he is applying, I asked him a question about mental health. As a mental health advocate, I was so happy to hear of his nationwide plan to bring mental wellness education to the public schools. The director of the National Counterterrorism Center was also one of my favorite speakers. He provided fascinating insight into the politics and policies that go into the domestic and international struggle against terrorist organizations. Hearing from speakers who were so well informed about the political sphere of influence gave me a deeper understanding into the intricacies of Washington politics and the duty that we all have to stay informed.

In conclusion, Washington Week and the United States Senate Youth Program have widened my worldview. Through a deeper understanding of our political system, I have greater faith in our democratic process and elected leaders. I have become a more open-minded individual by being exposed to and educated about opposing viewpoints. Furthermore, I have made some incredible friends who I will keep in touch with for years to come. I am so thankful to The Hearst Foundations for this incredible opportunity and to all of the people who worked to make this possible.