

Dennis Ruprecht, Jr., NH – 2017

It is, at times, difficult for the pen to articulate the declaration of the mind and to orchestrate the song of the heart. Such an event in which this is difficult is while reflecting on my experience during the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) Washington Week, but I will do my best.

People often describe events as “life-changing.” In my opinion, the phrase has become a bit of a cliché. As someone who has experienced many of these so called “life-changing” events, I can assure you that many, if not most, of these events truly aren’t life-changing, but the United States Senate Youth Program is.

I will begin by saying that the 103 other delegates, the Military Mentors, and the USSYP staff are what truly made this event. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Military Mentor, Captain Jeff Dierling, USMC.

It was inspiring to see delegates from all over the country, and even the world, converging for a few common goals: to learn more about our government, and to make our country better. We were all there because we believe in our government, we believe in America, and we love our country.

What surprised me most about this trip was the diversity of views. Before this trip, I lived in a bit of a political bubble. I knew the views of young people in New England and thought that I could use this to generalize the views of young people across the country. Of course, I knew that there were many people across the country with a plethora of differing views, but I had thought that most young people leaned Democratic, regardless of geography.

As I mentioned before, all 104 of us want to make our country better, but we all have different visions on how to do that. We often didn’t agree, but we value the notion that through civil discourse, discussion, compromise, and a variety of beliefs, we can achieve our mission of making America better than we found it.

Something that this group demonstrated that is so often missing in Washington, D.C. is the belief that one can debate an idea, not an individual. That someone who disagrees with you isn’t wrong or bad. Let me give you an example: today in politics you may have two candidates running for Congress. The underlying argument is often, “vote for me, because that person will destroy America (either intentionally, or unintentionally).” This argument is often made by one candidate based on the views or character of the other candidate. This group of delegates understands that every voice and every single person matters, and that when we delegitimize the concerns or values of another we undermine the concerns and values of ourselves as well as those of our country.

The United States Senate Youth Program’s Washington Week gave me a lot of hope for the future. While sitting at lunch one day during the week I thought to myself, “The 104 of us right here are the future of our government, and when the time comes, we’ll be ready for it.” At the end of Washington Week, we were no longer Democrats or Republicans. We were brothers, sisters, and Americans. When politics is brother against brother, sister against sister, or “us vs. them”, we all lose, but as long as the 104 of us have something to say about it, this level of division will no longer be the status quo of American politics.