

## Ben Duwve, OH – 2017

### USSYP 2017: The Week to Shape a Lifetime

In short, there is no easy way to describe the impact that the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) has had on this year's 103 participants, plus Military Mentors and staff, who had the incredible opportunities that may never come again to some of us. Well, let's hope that most of them do for at least some of us. Beginning in early December when I shrieked on the phone after my principal informed me that I had been accepted into this one-of-a-kind program, to finally meeting all the great students who would accompany me on this trip for the first time in GroupMe, I knew that I was about to embark on a trip that would have long lasting effects on the years that are ahead of me.

There is no possible way I could highlight every emotion I had for every one of the speakers, since all of them were amazing, but a select few (some I did not expect) really stood out from the rest. To start, despite not agreeing with them on many issues, I have to mention President Trump and Vice President Pence. Going through four security checkpoints (after probably being heavily background-checked), was a little overwhelming to get into the White House. Although soon after I realized I was ACTUALLY IN the White House, and then started seeing the many portraits of past first ladies and presidents and forgot about the whole tense security experience. We later toured many of the sitting rooms, and then finally settled into the East Room where we took a picture with the president and vice president. While they did not speak very long, I am very honored that USSYP 2017 had the great experience of being the first class to meet with the president and vice president simultaneously.

Next, I have to bring up Senators Heidi Heitkamp and Cory Booker. I admired each of these speaking engagements for entirely different reasons. First, Heidi Heitkamp spoke of how far she has come in her public service career, and has often beat the odds. Despite being diagnosed with breast cancer, she persevered and fought for herself regardless of the hardships she was going through, which I very much admire in her. Secondly, in the short time he had with us, Cory Booker managed to uplift almost everyone in the room with his speech about bipartisanship and working together to heal the divides in our country. I admired how much he spoke of those who are less fortunate and have not received the blessings that most of the people in the room at that time had received. That issue was near and dear to my heart the entire week as I was able to interact with some of our country's top officials, many of whom never get to meet everyone who is affected by their work. Then, after a staffer gestured to his watch, Cory Booker quickly finished his speech, set down the microphone, and literally ran out of the room. If you ask me, that was probably the most epic mic drop of the entire week.

Lastly, another crucial speaker during our week was retired CBS journalist Bob Schieffer. His journalism career roughly began around the time of the Kennedy assassination, and it was interesting to hear his perspective on recent (and not so recent) events in our history. He was also one of the few speakers who stayed and took selfies/signed autographs for EVERYONE. I can only imagine how he felt after signing 80+ autographs and having phone after phone take pictures of him, but I am grateful for him staying. While this last person wasn't a speaker, I would like to thank Senator Rob Portman for coming to the Wednesday Senate Reception and meeting with Nayan and I. It truly was an honor to have a brief conversation with someone who represents me in our government.

To conclude, I want to thank The Hearst Foundations for sponsoring this trip and funding a portion of my education with their provided scholarship. The idea of being able to spend a week around some of our country's leaders (and some of our country's leaders in around 30 years) was an experience that to this day I still feel like I did not fully appreciate. To the USSYP staff and the staff of The Mayflower Hotel, thank you for ensuring I never was even remotely hungry the entire week. The amazing three course meals were a special part of this week for anyone involved. I also want to thank everyone in my small town of Rossford, Ohio that helped me achieve this goal of mine. Teachers, parents, and administration officials do not get the appreciation that they deserve for helping shape the future generations of our country, and I am grateful every day for the ones I have at home.

Finally, I would like to thank the delegates of the United States Senate Youth Program's Class of 2017. While we may have seen some of the greatest public speakers in our country, I most appreciated being able to speak with all of you as we experienced this adventure together. One of the most eye-opening parts of this program was being able to make friends from around the country, and learn more about each delegate's individual story, and how they got where they are today. The discussions about everything from House of Cards to the best education policy to implement are truly one of the most memorable parts of this week. The amount of respect we had towards each other regardless of our opinions is something that the entire country should have. Political divides should never be a reason to

see others in a different light, and I hope that our USSYP class will go on to fix that. I know that we will all go on to make amazing careers, and I cannot wait to see the success that everyone achieves.

Once again, thanks to all who made this one of the best weeks of my life. I remember first viewing the website of this program before I applied and thinking to myself "I would be floating on cloud nine for the rest of my life if I get accepted to this," and I am so happy that I took a small leap of faith and landed where I am today. It truly was an honor, and I cannot express my extreme gratitude enough for being able to be a part of this truly life-changing experience.