

Amanda Finnegan, SD – 2017

To begin very bluntly, my experience as one of South Dakota's delegates to the 55th annual United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) will forever be remembered as one of the greatest of my life. I am eternally grateful to The Hearst Foundations, Jakub and Erin, all of the awe-inspiring speakers, the Military Mentors, my 103 wonderful fellow delegates, and everyone else involved in Washington Week. I truly believe that this program has shaped and altered my life toward public service far beyond my own comprehension. I understand that I will never be able to fully explain and accurately portray the impact USSYP had on me, but I am able to share all that I have learned through one short week as a member of the USSYP Class of 2017.

My knowledge about being successful in politics, and more importantly in life, has recently stemmed largely from the multitude of speakers I was able to witness while in Washington, D.C. Each person brought a new idea and a unique message that has still managed to leave me thinking about all they have said and done in their efforts to positively impact the world. From the beginning of Washington Week to the very end, every single person that I met--every senator, every politician, and every person advocating for change — taught me a lesson. When I visited the Newseum, CEO Dr. Jeffrey Herbst taught me that democracy cannot exist without the presence of the media to hold politicians accountable. Former Judge Robert Henry gave me the advice that, in regards to a political decision, I should always vote for a person, rather than allow something as temporal as an issue to sway my own views and vote. Elizabeth MacDonough and Julie Adams, the Senate parliamentarian and secretary of the Senate respectively, taught me that the need to make a difference and change the world is vital in a career in public service. At the Library of Congress, Dr. Carla Hayden and Dr. Betty Koed shared their insight and inspirational words; we all have a runway of possibilities ahead of us, but to truly understand where we are headed, we need to understand where we are from and how we got here. Chief Justice John Roberts taught me much about individual cases and the impact of Supreme Court decisions on everyday life, but also that it is incredibly important for the American public to know how the Supreme Court works. Senator Roger Wicker shared that, as a world superpower, we have no choice but to think globally. Dr. Vivek Murthy, the surgeon general, was one of my favorite speakers. He gave a moving address on thinking short-term, building sidewalks, remembering to take risks, and being a 'uniter' – someone that has not yet been constrained by conventional thinking, who has the ability to inspire others. One of my favorite quotes of the week resulted from his dialogue, "We're under pressure to fill every moment of empty space in life, but that empty space is what truly allows your life to blossom." Bob Schieffer of CBS News gave another inspirational message. He taught me that the true role of journalism is to keep the government in check, and that any person who threatens to undermine the press, threatens the very heart of democracy itself. Senator Heidi Heitkamp preached about the value of hard work and maintaining personal integrity against the pressures that comes with being part of a public office. Ron Dermer taught me that it's never too early to start working towards my dream, and that a life of public service truly is the highest calling. Finally, Senator Cory Booker taught me that I am here, receiving an incredible education, because of my ancestors, and because I cannot pay that back, I have to pay it *forward*. Every single speaker that I had the privilege of listening to during Washington Week has taught me something: whether it was educational, motivational, or inspirational. I have been forever moved by the words I heard while in Washington, D.C., and I can now say, without a doubt, that I am a firm believer in the conspiracy of love.

My next encounter with the overwhelming impact of USSYP came through the presence of the Military Mentors. Upon arrival at the airport, I was greeted by Captain Williams-Maynard. She was energetic, upbeat, and so incredibly overjoyed at the prospect of the coming week that I knew at that moment that the Military Mentors would be one of my favorite aspects of the week. A day later, I was placed in her mentor group. She has this wonderful talent of giving impromptu motivational speeches, so throughout the week, our group was showered with inspiration — whether that was about changing the world or finding the energy to finish our school work at night! The rest of the Military Mentors were equally as inspiring, and I was able to speak to many of them one-on-one and receive advice about my future in the Navy as an NROTC midshipman while in college. Because of my chosen career path, I was selected to participate in the wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, which was the most impactful experience I had while in Washington, D.C. I have Major Jonathan Bissell to thank for the tremendous honor and privilege of being able to march with three other delegates and lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns. That day was a myriad of emotions: honored at being able to salute the brothers and sisters I

will never know but will always remember, proud because I will soon be serving my country, and humbled by the gratitude of others. I simply cannot express the magnitude those moments held. Thinking of it even now, I still get emotional by the words that Major Bissell shared, and I know, without a doubt, that this opportunity was what solidified my desire to serve in the United States Navy.

Though every experience I had during Washington Week was incredible, I know that it was my 103 fellow delegates that truly changed my life. I love thinking back to the very first time we all met — the overwhelming number of people, handshakes, faces, and names. That night we were all told by the legendary Steve Cox that everyone we just met would somehow become our very closest friends in one short week. Let's just say, I'm sure I'm not the only person who doubted that. However, fast-forward to the last night where none of us slept and saying goodbye to each other was one of the hardest things we've ever had to do. USSYP brought together an incredible community of people who all believe in the future of this country, and who know that we can change the world if we stay involved and work hard. Every single delegate that I met shaped and changed my life, encouraging me to step out of my comfort zone, push boundaries, and challenge myself to be better. For most of the memories I made during this week, I have my fellow delegates to thank. From the legendary game of Mafia, hilarious conversations on coaches, political discussions at dinner, rapping the entirety of *Hamilton* at Mount Vernon, tripping while taking selfies at the Capitol, awkwardly posing for Jakub and Erin, freaking out over Capitol-shaped chocolate, dancing all night, and having midnight hall parties with my group, I have treasured every single moment as a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program.

One last time, I get to offer my most sincere thanks to every single person involved in making Washington Week as incredible as it was. This opportunity to experience government firsthand has truly made me realize my call to public service and to be an advocate for change in the world today. I learned so much while in Washington, D.C., but perhaps the most important knowledge I gained is that I will never stop learning. I cannot do justice to all that I experienced as a delegate to USSYP, but I will never forget the 103 best friends that this program gave me.