

Parin Bhaduri, TN – 2017

“This is going to be the best week of your life.”

These were the words that greeted me when I took my first steps into The Mayflower Hotel. No matter who I talked to, no matter what the conversation, the first thing I was told was how awesome these next seven days was going to be. Personally, it seemed strange that the pinnacle of my existence was coming so early. “It’s just a week,” I thought. “How impactful could it be?” I was skeptical. Of course I was skeptical. You don’t get selected for the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) without being skeptical.

But boy was I wrong.

The United States Senate Youth Program is certainly the most memorable experience I’ve ever encountered. From the main events of meeting the president and the chief justice of the Supreme Court, to the awesome opportunities of listening to CBS anchor Bob Schieffer and Senate Historian Betty Koed, each speaker provided a unique perspective on the current status of American politics and society. But more importantly, they all commonly touched on one particular topic: the importance of activism and public service. As citizens of the United States, we have a responsibility to perform our civic duty and encourage others to do the same. Our Founding Fathers formed this nation on the principle of government dictated by the people, and while we must honor their sacrifice and courage, it must be our mission to continue their legacy and seek positive change. Senator Booker’s inspiring story of his parents’ hardships and sacrifice, just for him to go to school and seek a better life, reaffirmed my dedication to public service and only encouraged me even more to fight for equal treatment and opportunity for all. Coming into USSYP, I had a cynical viewpoint on what government could achieve or accomplish. Now, I’ve realized that D.C is comprised of extremely smart and dedicated officials, determined to make our country the best it can. And while it may seem that progress is being hindered by politics and gridlock, we must always remember who yields the most power and can cause the greatest change: us, the people. We have the ability to dictate what the most important issues are and decide which representatives are elected to address them. It is only through public support and activism that real change can occur.

Yet the most memorable moments of all (and this is going to sound incredibly cliché) were of course with my fellow delegates. The 103 other students from all across the nation and the world consisted of the some of the most intelligent and passionate people I’ve encountered, but what amazed me even more was how closely I related to all of them. No matter how diverse our backgrounds, political preferences, or beliefs, the delegates and I shared one common creed: our interest in government and determination to participate in public service. Throughout Washington Week, I participated in such frank and topical discussions, discussions I can’t imagine having back home in Knoxville. The delegates I shared this week with are the only ones who remember and bear witness to my amazing experiences, and a select few, I can say without a doubt, have become lifelong friends.

Looking back, I am so grateful for Washington Week. Each and every experience was unique and incredible. Should you be lucky enough to become a delegate of the Senate Youth Program, cherish every moment. I certainly do, for it was truly the best week of my life.