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There are few times in a person's life when they truly feel unstoppable, capable of breaking down every barrier and changing the world for the better. That was my experience in the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). Ironically, as I'm writing an essay about my week, it's hard for me to put into words how life-changing Washington Week was. To make things a little easier, I'll *attempt* to reduce the week down to three "pillars" that I hope I can expand upon. They are *patriotism, purpose* and *companionship*.

Being born a citizen, in my opinion, to the greatest nation on the face of the Earth, it wasn't hard to resonate with the messages being shared throughout the week. I had known about the sacrifices made, blood shed and pain suffered so that we may live the lives we have as Americans. At USSYP, however, we saw where it happened; we witnessed the home of George Washington, the very place where dozens of colonists discussed the quest for liberty; we ate dinner just feet from the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, the two most revered documents in American history; we took pictures beside Harriet Tubman's shawl, a symbol of centuries of oppression made right by courageous men and women. At every Pledge of Allegiance, ceremony or speech given about our freedoms, it was hard not to shed a tear (as a side note, the Flag Retirement Ceremony almost did me in). I left Washington Week a "new" American, someone who (not unlike fresh immigrants) can really see the everyday practices of freedoms so many of us take for granted.

Something I definitely did not expect to get from USSYP was an idea of what I want to do with my life. I just thought I was getting to meet really cool people that I could tell my friends back home about (although there was plenty of that, too). We heard from ordinary citizens that worked hard to reach their goals. Most of the speakers had no intention of acquiring their positions, and informed the delegates that some opportunities simply come up, and that it is up to us on whether or not to take them. I had the honor of introducing Mr. Bob Schieffer, a fellow Texan and renowned reporter. Not only was he my favorite speaker, but I believe several delegates would have said the same. He shed a different light on Texas, one without guns or cowboy hats, and for that I am so proud. Mark Shriver, politician and president at Save the Children Action Network, came to the Mayflower on our sixth day. He shared his message about early childhood education, and how important it is to have people fighting to help our youth. Having two young nephews, Mr. Shriver's message really hit home. While listening to him speak, I looked down at my Moleskine journal and noticed I had written down six words: "I want to work for children." My eyes widened, and I probably made a scene, but at that moment, I think I figured out the big scary question of "what do you want to do in life?" Now, being an educator is definitely not written in my stars, but I realized that if elected to public office, I wanted to be an advocate for childhood education; if I decide to take the private sector route, I want to advocate and work towards improved childhood education across the board. However my life pans out, I want to be able to say that I made a difference in someone's life, and through my work, I hope those are the lives of American children. I truly believe that education is the great equalizer, but those in charge must value that statement even more if it will continue to ring true. From USSYP, I found what makes me tick, and I look forward to fulfilling those dreams.

You can imagine my bliss when placed in a room with 103 of the brightest, most achieving students in the nation. I seriously can't fully explain the impact that the other delegates had on me. Early in the week, I found the ones that I really connected with, and although I tried to branch out every day, there were a few that I truly consider some of the best friends I've ever made in the shortest time. They were Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, liberals and everything in between. Regardless of all of that, we were able to discuss the problems in our nation in respectful ways. Senator Cory Booker said it perfectly: "You cannot love your country without loving your countrymen." Take away the extra labels and ideologies, and you're left with American citizens that all want our nation to succeed. As for those close friends I made: we still talk every day, we give each other advice but most importantly, we care about one another. It's nice experiencing true friendship while also getting close to a future senator, governor or president of the United States. Thinking about them, I've laughed a lot (so many good memories), but mostly I've cried — I miss them all so much. In seven days, we all got so close and truly experienced America. We were constantly exhausted during all hours of the day, but didn't dare fall asleep and miss one second of our time there. I don't know if any of the other delegates will ever read this essay, but I truly want to say thank you for changing my life for the better. I think about you all constantly and I pray that our paths cross again. I love you all.

As is probably the case for most of the delegates, I am no stranger to leadership camps and workshops. At said programs, I always talk about how much I'll miss it and everyone I met. And that's all true, of course, but I've never wanted to relive a week more than I do my time in USSYP. No single experience has changed my mind on several topics, opened my heart to so many people and raised my

hopes for the future. The delegates I met are revolutionary in their own ways, and I can't wait to see them save the world one day (if they aren't doing it now). And whether I'm standing alongside them, or watching from home, I'll root for them every step of the way. At first I thought I was chosen by mistake, but after attending I knew that it was exactly where I needed to be. I'll remember my time in Washington for the rest of my life, and because of it, there's a whole lifetime of opportunity ahead that I can't wait to tackle.