

Joseph Touma, WV – 2017

Over one year ago, I set my sights on attending the United States Senate Youth Program. During my junior year of high school I gave the application a try, failing to proceed beyond the first round of the multistep process. Disappointed but not discouraged, I knew I had next year to give it one more shot. I worked tirelessly towards this goal, studying countless websites and articles to prepare for the exam and mulling over my finalist speech for many hours. I thought I was working towards a meeting with the president of the United States and a \$10,000 scholarship; what I actually found at the United States Senate Youth Program was many times more valuable.

Several weeks ago, I fondly recalled my arrival to Washington Week in a letter to Rayne Guilford, the director of the program. I recounted the words of the staffer picking me up, "I hope you are ready for the best week of your life." Many times during my life I have heard this phrase repeated, "The best week of your life." "Ya, right," I thought. What a lofty bar to set. And, let me tell you, I was not disappointed. I told Ms. Guilford this, and I will say it again, the United States Senate Youth Program was truly the best week of my life.

Though every delegate attends the same presentations and events, it is safe to say that no two delegates' experiences at this program are alike. The highlight of my week was when I had the honor of introducing Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room at the State Department. The confidence the program has in high school juniors and seniors to formulate our own remarks, never reviewed by the program, is something we rarely encounter in our everyday lives. As a student captivated by the diplomatic happenings of the world around me, especially with my family background in Syria, meeting and introducing the secretary of State is a moment I will remember my entire life.

In my introduction of Secretary Tillerson, I was able to relate his life's experience to my own, a humanizing process that I know many of my fellow delegates found at this program as well. During my remarks I explained, "Every week, during my journey to becoming an Eagle Scout, I recited these words, the opening of the Scout Oath: 'On my honor, I will do my best, to do my duty, to God and my country.' Secretary Tillerson, an Eagle Scout himself, has exemplified the prioritization of God and country in his career, and is bringing this same dedication to the country he loves with him to the State Department." Most Americans are on the outside of Washington, D.C. looking in, sometimes regarding these individuals as big name celebrities or movie stars. We, however, were afforded the opportunity to meet with these figures face to face, finding ourselves in them and realizing that they are simply people working as public servants on behalf of Americans throughout the world.

What I took away from the United States Senate Youth Program was much more than a hefty scholarship and a handshake with the president. Though these were definitely highlights of the experience, they only counted for a fraction of the week. In addition, I took away lasting relationships, a profound sense of patriotism, a new appreciation for the sacrifices of military men, women, and their families, and a newfound love and understanding for the public servants working within the capital of our great nation.