

P. Janae Swenson, ID – 2018

The United States Senate Youth Program Washington Week was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and a whirlwind of activity. While listening to three to four speakers a day and visiting national monuments, there was much to do. It was a week of 'firsts' for me. I have never flown on an airplane by myself, or had the chance to visit Washington, D.C., or meet people from every state in America. The main highlights of my week were being able to meet and ask questions of Supreme Court Justice Neil L. Gorsuch, tour the National Archives, shake Vice President Mike Pence's hand, and of course the bread bowl and the amazing desserts after almost every meal. I loved being immersed in the wonderful historical sites and I am so proud of my country. The most rewarding element was being able to meet the other 103 delegates. I was able to hear about problems and solutions other states were having and what their dynamic was. Coming from a red state, it was enlightening to hear more of the liberal viewpoints and to help each other get out of the tunnel vision from social media and like-minded people. I have made some lifelong friends because of this opportunity.

I learned a lot of important things while at the 2018 United States Senate Youth Program. The first lesson was on how to have an open mind. Everyone at the USSYP came from different regions of the United States. Each region has different outlooks on how things should be accomplished. Senator Tim Scott remarked on how everyone wants the same outcome, but we all have different views of how to get there. During the week I learned about the solutions other delegates had to issues we are seeing today. Although I did not always agree with these outlooks, I did learn that it's important to have an open mind and try to understand where they are coming from and to respect their opinions.

Along with learning how to keep an open mind, I also realized that it is important to stand for what you believe in. Just because you keep an open mind doesn't mean you have to give up on your solutions to problems. Everyone has different perspectives because of the life lessons they have had as they grow up. Just by ourselves, we cannot know all the solutions, but as a group, a possible solution can be found. This is why what you stand for is important as well. An example of this would be in rural and urban areas. I have insight on rural living but not in urban. When making laws if the urban representatives overpower all the rural representatives and all of their laws are passed, those laws might only be benefiting the urban and damaging the rural inhabitants. Standing up for what you believe in, so that those who align themselves with you can be heard, is very important and beneficial to the dialogue.

The next lesson I learned is how compromising is key for a successful system. In Congress today, agreeing on an issue is almost out of the question. If there happens to be a compromise it tends to be one party giving up entirely on most of their ideas to get the one thing they want. This should not be the case at all. It should be an equal compromise where each party can implement their solutions. Although there will most likely be no end to the debate on which party is correct, one thing is certain, with the meshing of these two parties, the better benefited the citizens will be. I'm glad that my fellow delegates feel the same and have set goals themselves to accomplish this.

The most significant lesson I learned was the importance of civility. There is an old saying that goes, "Just because we disagree with each other doesn't mean we can't be friends." In today's age when there are disagreements on issues it can mean the end of relationships. It is common to get offended when someone says something contrary to what you may believe. Often times there is a reason as to why a person believes the way they believe. A person may support the right to bear arms because they might have had an experience where a gun saved their life. On the flip side, another may want all guns banned because they were present in a school shooting or a loved one was killed because of a gun. Both sides are possible and the viewpoints are valid. It is important to remain respectful and not get immediately offended when we hear these opposing viewpoints. It is my hope that I carry this attitude with me throughout my life and teach my children to honor it, as well.

The United States Senate Youth Program has been such an instructional experience not only on how the government works, but also on life lessons. I was able to learn these important lessons because of the USSYP program organizers, speakers, Military Mentors, and the other amazing 103 delegates. I will never forget what I have learned and I know I will apply what I have to all aspects of my life as I go to college, raise a family, work, and someday run for office. My heartfelt thanks to the U.S Senate, the Hearst Foundations and all the people that made the very generous scholarship and Washington Week possible. I appreciate your continued effort to provide future generations with the opportunity to learn the same lessons that I have.