

Sydney Leidig, IL – 2018

Through reviewing my journal in the past few weeks, I've come to understand how much the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) truly changed my life. Throughout the week, I came to a new understanding of the democratic process, the interworking of the U.S. government, as well as the perspectives of others in different parts of the states. Through spending the week in D.C. and hearing from some incredible speakers, I've learned so much more about the way our government works than any class could provide me. I have to admit that the most valuable aspect of USSYP was the interactions that I had with the other delegates. I think that the reason the U.S. is so divided in terms of political opinion is that most people don't understand the other side of the argument. This is because most people live in the bubble of their own state, city, or county and rarely interact outside of that bubble. This lack of access to the other side and different perspectives is what has led to the divisiveness causing an inability to compromise on policy issues. Through USSYP, I was able to hear perspectives from all across the country and better understand the scope of many different issues. In addition to the understanding, I was also so inspired by the ambition held by all my co-delegates. It was beyond refreshing to see people my age with such dedication to democracy and ambition to elicit progress in the world.

Ever since I became interested in politics, I pictured myself as the person standing behind the candidate: the one who worked to get others elected, back in the shadows while fighting for the greatness of another person. I saw myself as a professional campaign manager, a Congressional secretary, maybe even a White House staffer or press secretary. However, The United States Senate Youth Program challenged this long-held vision I had for my future. In the past, I had always thought that I would never quite know enough to be qualified for office. I idealized the politicians as omniscient leaders who knew everything there was to know about the government and public policy. It wasn't until hearing Sen. Amy Klobuchar's speech on the Thursday of Washington Week that I realized I wanted to run for office, myself, one day. Sen. Klobuchar spoke to us about the need for more women to run for office so as to better represent women in this country. She also spoke about the different standards held to men and women within government. She explained that women often feel they don't know enough to run for an office, which is exactly the way I had felt for the longest time. This feeling was only strengthened by our interaction with Sen. John Lewis, who encouraged us to stand up to and fight injustices. Overall, USSYP gave me both the inspiration as well as the confidence to pursue a political career, and I now hope to run for office one day.

Before hearing the speakers at USSYP, I regarded political positions to just be a job like any other. There were responsibilities, wages, promotions, etc. Because of USSYP, I've since realized that the officials who run our government don't hold normal jobs. This isn't because of the fame of C-SPAN or frequent appearances on media networks, but is instead because of the responsibility and civic duty they have to this country. The U.S. employs a system of indirect democracy, in other words, our citizens elect representatives and they make decisions concerning policy and government. The American people must place a great deal of trust in their representatives, and the elected officials must not break this trust in order for the system to work. It was through listening to the speeches of the senators that I realized the important role that civic duty plays in our democracy. In addition, when visiting the Arlington National Cemetery, I was shown, first-hand, the true impact that government officials have. As pointed out by one of our Military Mentors, the decisions that our officials make on foreign policy affect the lives of countless Americans serving in the military. This reminder will forever remain in the back of my mind as I pursue a role in government.

The week was filled with surreal experiences such as hearing Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders speak on the Senate floor or shaking the hands of John Lewis and Kamala Harris. One of the best aspects of USSYP was the opportunity to live in Washington, D.C. for the week. Being in the same atmosphere as the politicians who shape and have shaped our current government was exhilarating. Whether it was having dinner with senators and diplomats or walking through the halls of the Capitol, Supreme Court, or the White House, the whole experience gave me a chance to see the inside of the system. It's very easy for a government to give us a broad, big-picture view as to how the

system works, but through my USSYP experience I learned so much about the smaller details that keep the system running. For example, I had never thought about the importance of the Senate parliamentarian or the Senate sergeant at arms until we spoke with them directly. I gained a new understanding and respect for the work done by those in D.C.

Despite all the incredible experiences I had at USSYP, I have to admit that the most influential part wasn't an event, speaker, or place but was, instead, the other delegates that I was able to meet during Washington Week. I am still surprised by how many close relationships I formed with a group of people I had only spent a week with. Considering there were 104 delegates, I assumed that I wouldn't be able to get to know them all, but I couldn't have been more wrong. I had so many meaningful conversations both with delegates that had very similar and very different opinions than I. I learned more about the different issues that students my age face in other regions of the countries and got to hear about issues that other students felt passionately about. This was by far the most valuable part of the whole experience. Not only did I learn so much from the other delegates, but I was also so inspired by all of them. Specifically, on International Women's Day, I was able to converse with the other female delegates about the challenges we've overcome and the hopes we share for women of future generations.

I never dreamed that I would be lucky enough to have the experience that I did through the United States Senate Youth Program. I am so grateful to all the speakers we had, the U.S. Senate, the Hearst Foundations, our program directors, and my fellow delegates for, quite literally, changing my life. I occasionally reread my journal from the week, and although it makes me sad that it's over, I know that I will carry this experience with me for the rest of my life. I will also take with me the friendships I've made with all my wonderful co-delegates and look forward to working with them in the real Senate one day.