

The U.S. Senate Youth Program will hold epiphanies and emotions and experiences I will take to my grave. Where do I even begin to remark on such an embark? From the moment I first met my co-delegate in person to the night of us both bidding farewell to our friends --- friends that I had never made such a connection with --- I knew that I would never come across such a profound group of students at one setting again. It was the highest honor to meet and interact with our government officials, officials who create and enact the policies that affect me and the identities I claim each day. With that, some of the greatest conversations I had during the entirety of the week took place later in the day, located up in the mezzanine of The Mayflower. There was a parallelism throughout the week that manifested itself between every conversation I had and every speech I listened to. To be given the opportunity I was as young politically active youth is revolutionary and I am utterly thankful for it.

What is most important is I spoke my truth. The program made sure to give me and all my fellow delegates that platform. And I listened to others project their own. I listened to Congressman John Lewis speak out for activism against moral wrongdoings, Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch on the constitution as an entity, Executive Editor Martin Baron expressing his vocation of supplying the truth. And more holistically, I listened to my fellow delegates project their own truths. I listened to them passionately speak on the matters that resonated within them. Matters that transformed them into advocates for change, advocates for bipartisanship, advocates for equity. And I simply listened to their identities, their experiences, their likes and dislikes. I recognized these fellow leaders as people, not merely political entities. That is the true unification throughout us all. It is most notable to mention the interactions I had with delegates who did not identify themselves on the same political platform as I. We did not approach the same matters with the same mindsets or ideas for change, but the importance behind these interactions is simply that we listened. We listened to what was said. We strived to understand it and asked questions. We did not wish to feed into the polarization of the parties; there has always been power in unity. We educated one another and lead the frank dialogue we need in order to truly represent the democracy we all yearn to (and shall) represent. This aspect of the program exemplified this.

The week has ignited the fire within me. The flame may have begun as I roamed the floors of the Newseum, gazing upon activism on different occasions and platforms. Or it may have been waiting outside Russell Senate Office Building, letting the wind stir between our excited conversations before we met our senators. Perhaps it was as I walked around The White House, feeling the history beneath my feet and the air of prestige around me. These moments collectively impacted me in ways I cannot even begin to express. It has completely refined my identity and my confidence in where I can see myself in the near future. It has created a fire to continue that sense of leadership and equity that I was immersed in all throughout my time in Washington. I can now envision myself in a position of power, advocating for these very virtues I saw during the program. What is important is that we are now seeds of change for our communities. We all return to our familiar occupations with a newfound mindset about defining our wants and how we will get there. Each one of us has the power to stimulate a mere thought into action, all throughout the array of subjects and fields that interest us. We are the faces that will reflect our generation and its manifestation of initiative.

And so I shall end this reflection with a quote from my fellow delegate and friend from New Jersey, Taiwo Odunowo: "Heroism is episodic, leadership is systematic." That is my takeaway from the program. We are here to educate and dismantle the system through our bipartisan understanding of what it means to be a leader. We are here for innovation. We are here to represent as the emblem of the future. So I thank the U.S. Senate Youth Program for this opportunity. Forever.