

Jasman Singh, NJ – 2018

Is my luggage overweight? Am I going to get lost in the airport? Will my flight get delayed?

My biggest concern going into the week was flying alone. After stopping to ask literally every American Airlines agent where baggage claim was in Dulles, I found three Military Mentors (Major Barnes and Captain Iida and Major Corbett) waiting for me and my co-delegate.

We proceeded to enter two unmarked tinted black four-door SUV's (full presidential style) and I explained to the other delegates that I was, in fact, not a chain-smoker, but a very passionate basketball fan who lost his voice supporting his team.

Little did I know my first encounters with these strangers would turn into bonds that would transform my life. Meeting Justice Gorsuch was cool. Seeing General (Mad Dog) Mattis in the back of the room at the Pentagon was absolutely terrifying. Meeting Cory Booker was amazing. Yet, discussing gun reform with Ely (WV), underserved community stimulus packages with Kim (NY), and the shortcomings of both liberalism and conservatism with Cole (CA), Andrew (NY), Connor (VT) was still cooler. I think what makes the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) so unique isn't the fact that it's some of the most intelligent high schoolers in the nation brought together. There's plenty of occasions where kids like that meet. What makes USSYP different is that it's a group of high schoolers with conviction in their beliefs and the willingness to share those ideas. It's different because students here have the ability to "disagree without being disagreeable" as Justice Gorsuch put it. Civility is paramount, and I've never seen a more astounding display of professionalism from students anywhere.

Being a part of USSYP showed me more than the generalizations we tend to make when looking at a map. When we easily classify areas or people as a certain type, USSYP showed me how students across the nation were breaking from the mold. Growing up I've lived in the same area my entire life and I've been directly exposed to more or less the same collective rationale of liberal politics in my limited bubble, so being around some of the brightest people from every state greatly changed my impression of my nation as a whole. One thing I learned was that Texans really do love their steak. Jay (TX) didn't touch the salad course at any of the meals, and loved his steak, and sometimes even ate mine, at dinners where we had his beloved red meat. Meeting my fellow delegates gave me a better impression of how our environments influence our thinking. We are a product of our culture and Washington Week taught me the importance of understanding the complex personalities of people and their lifestyles before delving into issue debates.

Going into the week I saw how infinitely simple and easy it was to characterize people's views and vilify them or characterize them as being uninformed. We counteract this by befriending people that are not like us; we become more compassionate and we are collectively more able to see the nuanced shades of gray between what's often misconstrued as black and white. Through USSYP, I've come to understand that the often dumbed-down version of political arguments that we read in the news and media are just that - dumb. We have a tendency to want to find a simple solution to multifaceted issues, to have comfortable conversations about difficult topics, and to take shortcuts out of convoluted paths. But our greatest growth occurs when we move beyond these barrier zones that we feel safe in. I've learned that it's okay to be uncomfortable when we argue because we learn from uncomfortable experiences. A fellow delegate, Mackenzie (CA), told me that tension means we were forced to think about something said. And because we were introspective, we were forced to analyze ourselves and we are better for it.

From my peers and USSYP staff, I learned what it means to truly understand one another. A particularly humanizing political moment for me was when Senator Amy Klobuchar talked about gun control and school safety in the aftermath of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas tragedy. The moment was emotional for all of us, especially the Florida delegates, Stephen and Carlee. As Jakub, an incredibly talented photographer, bent down to capture the moment, he suddenly pulled away from his

camera. I thought maybe the lens cover was still on, or maybe the camera was malfunctioning, but he pulled back to wipe away tears. And soon I found my face a little bit redder and a little bit wetter. I saw the compassion of the moment and our ability to truly put people over politics, but Brian Kamoie, FEMA Deputy Administrator and USSYP Alum, also said “we shouldn’t need a tragedy to come together.” As Americans, we share a powerful sense of patriotism, a common bond that should cause us to love our neighbors. USSYP showed me a subset of America willing to learn and to love, a subset of people that not only was different in their ideologies and their views and their backgrounds but also in their appearance. And we were tolerant and respectful and creative and brilliant because of it, rather than in spite of it.

We show our true depth as people when we take the time to step out of our bubbles and interact with those who may think differently than us or those who may know more than us. We educate ourselves in every conversation we have and we grow with every remark we make. We change our tendencies, reform our assumptions and reevaluate our stances with the help of discourse. At the United States Senate Youth Program, I had abundant opportunities to listen and to learn. All 104 of us sat in silence as Congressman John Lewis spoke of civil disobedience and his passion and time invested into the Civil Rights Movement. He was arrested over 45 times - 45 chances to give up, to quit, and to lose sight of his dreams of equality. Yet, he persisted to make his America the best it could be and remained steadfast in his principles and inspired thousands along the way.

Leaders, as I’ve come to learn, don’t merely have vision and drive, but they push others around them to step up their game and maximize their potential. From the speakers who are creating changes in national policy right now to my peers who are doing everything from canvassing for gubernatorial candidates to lobbying for legislative change in immigration policy to others who’re running for state office in an organization, I’ve learned the truth in the saying “history is made of ordinary people who try to achieve something extraordinary.” (Senate Historian Betty Koed) My only hope is that after the most inspiring week of a lifetime, the leaders of today will leave a couple pages in the books for my peers and myself who’ll continue their legacy of leadership after they pass down the torch tomorrow.