

Kimberly Collins, NY -- 2018

President Abraham Lincoln articulated to Congress in 1862, "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew." This quotation fondly represents an overarching theme that has become evident to me during my time in Washington, D.C. as a delegate for the United States Senate Youth Program. The theme that has prevailed is with changing times, we, as American citizens, must rise to fight the inequities of the present, and continue to sustain American democracy. This life-changing experience is an opportunity granted by the Hearst Foundations and aims to enlighten young, politically aware students about the varying spheres of public service. This week-long experience comes with a myriad of emotions as each delegate was faced with speakers and other fellow delegates who possessed different political views and beliefs. As a student just becoming exposed to the complexity of international and domestic politics, I learned more than any lecture or textbook could have ever taught me. With continuous news stories highlighting injustices that plague our society, the feeling that has prevailed is my belief in American democracy and the possibility of an equal America for all people.

A major component of Washington Week was the opportunity to meet legislators and other important political figures who are in various fields of public service. Personally, my favorite speaker was Congressman John Lewis. As a young child, I learned about his impact in forging civil rights in America. When Congressman Lewis spoke to us, on the anniversary of when he was almost brutally killed crossing the Pettus Bridge, I could not help but cry. Not only was I in the presence of one of the last standing leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, but Congressman Lewis instilled lasting words of hope within us all. His unwavering belief that full equality will come for all, further ignited my passion to continue fighting for socioeconomic equality. Additionally, Senate Historian, Betty Koed, telling the full story and significance of Charles Sumner was emotional and unveiled the fervor public servants possess that drives historical change. Countless times throughout the trip I continued to be in awe as I gazed upon the faces of famous senators, the president, judges, and more important leaders. Oftentimes in my own community I used to feel like another individual, dreaming for change but not having the bravery to calculate my next steps. However, especially in my moments of being in the presence of these leaders, I realized the power I had in representing New York State, the black community, and women during this prestigious week. It became cognizant to me that I could pursue my passion as all these speakers did and become an advocate for the injustices I see and face each day. Drawing back to the quotation by Abraham Lincoln that Senator Angus King stated during his presentation, each keynote speaker in different, yet prominent ways, inspired me to act now. Act to create fair legislation, act to eliminate corruption, and act to create a more egalitarian America.

Perhaps education is obtained not only from traditional teaching methods, but from discussion and exposure to the real world. The United States Senate Youth Program is unique in that it allows for delegates to learn about opposing viewpoints, not just from keynote speakers, but from other delegates as well. Each day as the program progressed, I sat with different students who spoke upon their personal political views and the state of their own communities. The stories that many delegates and even Military Mentors shared about their own life experiences, portrayed alternative viewpoints that I had never considered. Being removed from the distinct political bubble that encapsulates my area in New York, expanded my frame of view and altered some of my own political convictions. Dipping my feet into different pools of view was one of the most educational opportunities I experienced. We often forget how complex America truly is. While we are all bound by this notion of an American identity, there are a myriad of ways that individuals choose to live and present that identity. Our nation must be open to the task of letting all voices be heard in order to maintain a nation that serves its people best. On top of learning from my peers, I created many lasting friendships. The delegates that were chosen for this program are the most poised, passionate, and considerate people I have met. My relationships with my peers have deepened and provided me such happiness. There is a common feeling among us delegates to uplift each other and become the best leaders for this country. A network has formed among us that radiates positive inspirational words of encouragement and assistance in all future endeavors.

To my fellow delegates, thank you for being some of the best young minds that America has to offer. You all have instilled a greater sense of determination within me. To the Hearst Foundations, thank you for allowing students who are underrepresented to have an equal chance to learn and experience the political process. I have solidified my decision to one day run for the United States Senate. Finally, to all who are reading, our nation is calling out to us to be the best citizens we can be. Changing times calls for continued leadership and a belief in the principles of the Constitution. As the United States Senate Youth Program has taught me, let us all understand the importance of fighting to achieve the America we dream about. The ability to foster change resides within us all.