

Harshini Abbaraju, SC -- 2018

Many of us are familiar with the famous Dr. Seuss quote that goes, “Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.” I can assure you that an overwhelming majority of the 2018 Senate Youth delegates did not heed those words of advice. Many tears were shed during and after the 2018 United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) Washington Week. These included tears of joy, sorrow, anger, enlightenment, and everything in between.

That’s because Washington Week is unmatched in its ability to deeply move, challenge, inspire, and create bonds between the next generation of American public servants. It is a short week filled with long days — and each day, the collective enthusiasm only increases.

Anyone who merely glances at a USSYP schedule can glean the fact that the speakers and site visits expose delegates, in a first-hand manner, to the most powerful institutions in our government and society. From meeting the president and vice president at the White House, to hearing from Cabinet secretaries and senators, to partaking in a private discussion for almost two hours with a Supreme Court justice in the SCOTUS oral argument hall — and so on and so forth — USSYP grants delegates a privileged level of access to the halls of power, and thus, helps us envision ourselves in those halls someday.

Although it is hard for me to select a single favorite speaker, I particularly enjoyed hearing from Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota. She was sincerely charismatic, good-humored, and personable. She also shared some relevant thoughts about gendered inequities and double standards in our current political culture. At one point, she jokingly said something along the lines of “so many of my male colleagues think that just owning a Toyota pick-up truck makes them qualified to discuss international trade policy.”

In all seriousness, USSYP is most importantly a microcosm of what our future looks like.

USSYP is a progressive activist of color becoming dear friends with a Trump-supporting environmentalist from a different state and even more different family background. USSYP is groups of students of color coming together at night and forming solidarity-based delegations to discuss the specific political and cultural challenges faced by their communities. USSYP is a debate between groups of conservative and liberal delegates about pressing policy issues like gun control, immigration reform, and school choice. USSYP is students defending Jewish classmates in the face of insensitive comments made by peers. USSYP is, at its core, a developmental exercise in statesmanship.

USSYP is bipartisanship and partisanship, agreeability and disagreement, diversity and discussion, collaboration and civility — all at once. As lofty as this all may sound, it is my attempt to put into words the qualities of a program that has had a transformative effect on me. It is my attempt to describe the indescribable. But, truly, words can do no justice.

The immense admiration and love that I feel towards the friends I met through this unique program — students who are making an incredible impact through numerous leadership roles, volunteer activities, political activism, and civic engagement initiatives in communities across our nation — stems from what became my favorite part of USSYP. Indeed, my fellow delegates were undoubtedly the best part of the best week of my life.