

Henry Lear, SC – 2018

I still have a lot to learn. My time in Washington opened my eyes to what felt like another world, and built my understanding of the fundamentally unjust world we live in. It's a society and economy that I'm determined to change, and it's without a doubt that my experiences with the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) helped me to realize.

Meeting other delegates was nothing short of a privilege. The passion and interest that my peers demonstrated was admirable. Speaking to them about politics was enlightening and an excellent opportunity for discourse. I'm glad that a wide range of beliefs were held among us, and enjoyed speaking to those to the right of me, even if we disagreed on a great deal. I am distraught when I hear those in my generation express political apathy: no matter your interest in politics, your landlord, health insurer, and corporate multi-billionaires will leverage their own political influence to affect you—it is imperative that everyone understand and participate in the political process. Hearing from my peers in Washington strengthened my realization that there remain engaged and informed high school students despite our common portrayal as apathetic, disinterested citizens.

The opulence and indulgence of the program was an interesting aspect. The degree of luxury, from food to our rooms, reminded me that just miles away, there were families starving in public housing developments and people sleeping on the streets. This also served as personal motivation to take on politics not as an interest or hobby, but as a moral obligation. USSYP allowed me to see that in a world like the one I live in, something has to change.

I am grateful for the experience I was afforded, for those I met, and for the wisdom I'll take onward in life. I know I still have much to learn, but I also recognize what that week added to my life. I appreciate the efforts of the Hearst Foundations and its staff.