

James "Jay" Williamson, TX -- 2018

*Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?':] A republic, if you can keep it. - Benjamin Franklin*

My time at the Senate Youth Program was epitomized by this Benjamin Franklin quote. It illustrates to me how, even as young adults, this is our generation's country and we have the voice to truly make an impact. From the beginning of my time with this program, I was constantly shown that this would be an opportunity unlike any other.

The sheer scale of Senate Youth didn't truly set in until after officially receiving our schedule, because at that point almost every name on that list was someone of unique prominence in Washington. It instantly became clear that we would have the pleasure of being a part of something that can't be described in mere words. Nothing compares to the relationships formed between fellow delegates; it was apparent months before the program started that these were truly some of the best and brightest people offered by this generation. Yet it wasn't just their intelligence. Every single one of them in some way was a unique product of their own experiences. Whether it was being hyper-involved outside school, being nationally ranked debaters, penning their own books, or owning their own businesses, this was a group of game-changers that would also end up becoming some of the friends that I intend to have for the rest of my life. In a matter of a week, I was able to make friendships that I miss more and more every day, and it was the development of these relationships that reminded me that there is hope yet for our country. If two teenagers from opposite sides of the country and vastly differing environments are able to relate to one another, it is still entirely possible for Americans to find compromises between their own lifestyles and ideologies. It didn't matter how tired we were, or whether or not we just met: there was openness between the various delegates and I could not be more proud to say that I was a part of a group this special. I know among our 104 delegates we have at least a future president and numerous other era-defining individuals. Never did I expect to have my life so vastly changed by my own peers, and yet that is exactly what happened.

I really appreciate the mentor groups we were divided into, as it not only gave us a small group to constantly reflect with, but allowed us even more of an opportunity to develop a personal relationship with the Military Mentors. Having the Military Mentors is one of the best parts of this program – I would consider the insights provided by them and the other delegates to be the most useful, because these perspectives offered were so unique in comparison to everything I'd had growing up. They really shed light on so many things about the military I had never really considered and it caused me to gain even more respect for our men and women in arms.

Looking back, it is hard to comprehend literally how important and influential some of the speakers were, and that I have truly shared the same room with people like John Lewis and Judge Gorsuch. To think that people with their own chapters in our history books were a mere fifteen feet in front of us is still mind-boggling. My favorite thing about these speakers was how unique their own journeys were to the place they are at now. Also I was able to learn about bipartisan positions that impact us on a daily basis like the Senate Parliamentarian that previously I had never even really heard about. Being able to hear from Judge Gorsuch was extremely special to me, and listening to a Supreme Court justice in the same room where dozens of key cases have been decided was a feeling I will never forget. What I'll carry most from these speakers is really how many different positions have the ability to impact us and how the importance of civility and compromise lead to a much more productive union.

USSYP isn't just a program or a leadership camp. It was a week-long experience that reaffirmed my desire to serve in public office, all the while allowing me to build everlasting friendships and listen to some of the most well-known people in America. At the end of it, though, what I'm most proud of is our lessons on civility and knowing the strength the future holds. Dinner is served.