

Connor Solimano, VT -- 2018

How can I describe the indescribable? The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) is one of those experiences that truly transcends words; it simply cannot be conveyed through an essay. I can still remember reading prior delegates' essays and wondering how a one-week trip could be so transformative, so "life-changing" as some called it. I didn't believe, or rather didn't understand, that it could be that powerful. This was just one of my many preconceived notions that completely changed over the course of the week.

We all began the week with preconceptions – about the program, the people we would meet, and the other delegates. We hailed from all corners of the United States, bringing with us vastly different political views and life experiences. This diversity, of both thought and background, set the stage for an unparalleled learning opportunity that many of us were not prepared for. But despite our differences, we all shared a passion for politics, a desire to learn, and a drive to help those around us. These shared goals allowed us to connect on a deeper level, appreciating each person for who they were rather than the ideologies they subscribed to. We got to know the people before their politics, and that made all the difference. For above all, Washington Week was a week about friendship, character, and learning.

Judge Robert Henry, former Chief Judge of the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals, kicked off our week with his discussion of civility in politics. His long-time friend and Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch met with us later in the week, encouraging us to follow the same ideals that Judge Henry so lauded. Justice Gorsuch, in his discussion of the importance of political discourse, left us with a phrase that I will never forget: "Just because you disagree doesn't mean you need to be disagreeable." All too often we get so caught up in our political ideologies and debates that we forget one of the most basic tenants of our society: treat others how you would like to be treated. We forget that the person on the other side of the aisle cares just as much about the success of our country as we ourselves do. This fact was made especially clear by the end of our meeting with Justice Gorsuch. Many of us left the Supreme Court with a profound respect for him as a man and public servant regardless of where we stood on the political spectrum. His soft-spoken and amiable nature humanized him in a way that no television or news article could.

In my discussion about character, I would be remiss if I did not mention the Military Mentors. These unbelievably talented men and women embody the attributes of true public servants: humility, respect, and compassion for those who cannot help themselves. Their accomplishments are awe-inspiring, but their admirable dispositions are what really set them apart. Our Military Mentors guided us through the week with a refreshing alacrity, alternating between lighthearted jokes and insightful remarks.

Each delegate brought with them a passion and insight that made discussions easy to come by but hard to leave. The best conversations I had were with those whom I did not completely agree with because they challenged my conventional thoughts. We took Senator Angus King's words to heart when he said, "Don't just hear – listen." Instead of simply arguing, we listened, truly listened, to the ideas that we each had to say, understanding the unique perspectives that we all had to offer. This was a testament to the trust we had in each other and the character traits that USSYP so esteems. Our ability to foster civil and respectful discourse allowed our incredibly diverse group to grow closer than I ever could have imagined.

I left the United States Senate Youth Program with a renewed sense of purpose and refreshed state of mind. The speakers were amazing, the food was other-worldly, and the venues were unimaginably beautiful. But, above all, the other delegates were what made this week so life-changing. The friendships we formed in a week will last a lifetime.