

Harrison Bushnell, VT – 2018

The following statement is crazy but true: the best part of my United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) experience was my fellow delegates. I say that that is crazy because anyone reading the speaker list for the week would assume that was the most remarkable aspect. Or anyone tasting the delicious food or exploring the luxurious Mayflower hotel might assume that was the highlight. And do not get me wrong, those elements of the week added immeasurably.

Meeting Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch was a fascinating experience. Standing before us in the Supreme Court, a place I've respected from an early age, was a current United States Supreme Court justice. Here was also a man who I disagree with on so many issues and yet I learned that the values he holds close are many of the values I do too. It was interesting to explore how two people can agree so clearly on values and believe such different actions should be taken. I'm grateful to have had this experience because it is only through exploring the decisions and character of those we disagree with that we learn something about ourselves and how to find common ground amid polarization.

One of the most moving speakers in the program was meeting United States Representative and civil rights' leader John Lewis. Another delegate described the feeling in the room before he walked in as similar to that before a king or president arrives in a room. There was a hush unique to the most respected and revered of our leaders. To see the impact that Representative Lewis has had on so many Americans was truly inspiring. I have rarely seen a room as full of adoration.

These two speakers were just two of many, many leaders of our nation we had the privilege to hear speak. I was impressed by the range of backgrounds and political affiliation among the leaders that spoke to us. We also spent time with Military Mentors all week; they added another dimension of amazing to the program. Their devotion to our nation, their insights into everything from government to how to live a fulfilling life, and their understanding of how important it is to realize the good fortune we have living in America was inspiring. To top that off, we were treated to delicious three-course meals all week long and an absolutely incredible hotel.

But like I said, my fellow delegates were the best part. It's hard to encapsulate the friendships I hope will last a lifetime or the conversations I had, but I'll do my best.

I started to realize this group was made up of intelligent, empathetic, genuine students from around the country early on in the program. I'm only realizing now the extent to which this group truly embodies those descriptors. Every delegate had insights about what made their local communities tick and that's so important. Here were many of our nation's next leaders who understand the importance of community and of knowing where you came from.

Coming from rural Vermont, I am so grateful to have met such a diverse group of individuals each with a personal background that sets them apart. Learning from my fellow delegates' stories, family values, and individual experiences was inspiring and eye-opening. Every community is in some way a bubble, blocked from understanding certain ways of living, but what better way to embrace and bring together the diversity of our nation, than the United States Senate Youth Program.

I am so appreciative of the hard-working USSYP staff who spend all year making this life-changing week possible, the Military Mentors who really shaped my experience to be the incredible one it was, the Hearst Foundations for its generosity in cultivating the nation's young leaders, and the 103 other delegates whose passion and kindness humbles me.