

Abhinav Kolli, AZ – 2019

As my fellow delegates and I walked into the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel – a room where there would be no lack of awe and wonder over the coming week – we received an ordinary blue leather-bound journal to store the countless memories we would collect over the course of this apparently lifechanging program. Trusting the words of the program directors and my preceding delegates, I planned to guard my journal from all harm, keeping scratches from appearing on its leather cover and ensuring I maintained the immaculate handwriting I had composed on the first page throughout the program’s duration.

My mission wasn’t accomplished. The journal laying on my desk today bears no resemblance to the one imagined in my mind that first day. As you flip through my journal’s pages, you’ll see consistently worsening handwriting. You’ll progress from my ornate notes on Chief Justice Roberts’s remarks to my chicken scratch depiction of General Selva’s reflections. However, this mismatch between expectations and reality is representative of the extent that the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) has surpassed all of my expectations and dramatically changed my worldview. I was right to trust the words of those former delegates.

Don’t get me wrong. When I walked onto that brutally boring flight from Phoenix, I couldn’t wait to meet all my fellow delegates and hear all the inspiring words from the program’s speakers. But it really was so much more than that. Over the course of one week, I broadened my perspectives on this country and the people in it. I met and spoke with so many people from so many different places. I learned the meaning and value of service from the people fulfilling it to the highest degree.

The first couple days of the program were filled with handshakes and introductions with fellow delegates. “So many people from so many places!” I exclaimed just before realizing that I might have to repeat a few introductions the next day. These fellow delegates would fill the rest of my week with so many eye-opening stories and debates. Never before had I been exposed to such a diverse set of people with so many personal perspectives to share. I learned of the Montana cattle rancher’s plight and the issues of the unemployed coal miner in the Midwest. My fellow delegates, without a doubt, are the part of USSYP that have left the greatest impact on me.

My fellow delegates’ influence on me, however, in no way serves to undermine the impact that the awe-inspiring speakers of the program left on me. I still remember a distinct feeling of motionless when Chief Justice Roberts or President Trump walked into the room. People that once filled my TV screen were standing right in front of me, tasked with speaking to the notion of public service. I can still remember certain statements to the exact word – statements that defined what it meant to serve. During her animated speech, Deputy Director of National Intelligence Susan Gordon would say, “If we steal the future from our youth, we have no future.” It was statements like these that redefined what service is to me and how I plan to serve. It was notes consisting of moments like these that make the unkempt handwriting and bruised leather worth it.

USSYP helped me grow as a person – intellectually and literally. We were served three course meals three times a day. What else would you expect? But all joking aside, my week in D.C. was packed with events that have dramatically altered my outlook on life and service. I have a newfound perspective on what this nation is and the lives of the people in it.