

Lauren Kong, CA – 2019

Dear USSYP,

I write this love letter to you in a vain attempt to adequately express my overwhelming gratitude toward the program, the week, and the people that made the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) one of the most incredible and life changing experience I've ever had.

To all the military heroes and civil servants, to those who tirelessly organized this incredible event and without whom it would not exist, to – of course - my Baby Ducklings, and to all of the delegates and friends whose friendship carried me on the highest of spirits during that week – and still do - thank you.

I cannot begin to describe how in love with USSYP I was, and still am.

USSYP humanized the institutions that are often impersonalized and reviled and instilled in me an incredible feeling of honor and awe for the people who work tirelessly in service for the welfare of others for the common good. The differences in beliefs of how to achieve that common good, whether disparities of personal ideals or partisan ideologies, pale in comparison to the deep unity of service that I saw repeatedly echoed in my time at Washington Week.

I saw that those who serve our country have many different jobs, faces, and backgrounds. Regardless of what they do or who they are, the heroes that serve our country have personally committed to safeguarding the promises of our country.

One of the heroes that I think the world of is my Military Mentor Lt. Madeline Platt. Her strength, compassion, silliness, boss dance moves, and mentorship was a truly an abiding example of selfless sacrifice and genuine, quality leadership. She showed me not to be afraid of working hard, not just in pursuit of a goal, but also for the sole virtue of working hard. My group named ourselves the Baby Ducklings because we so earnestly and lovingly followed Lt. Platt around like a group of baby ducklings. My Baby Duckling sisters are incredible, strong, hilarious, and beautiful girls that I love so much and miss terribly. And I believe that we bonded so extraordinary well and lightning fast because Lt. Platt always fostered an environment of inclusiveness, mutual respect, and kindness. Through meeting Lt. Platt, I settled on the strength of conviction that if she – an incredible, strong, selfless role model - committed her life to serve her country, how can I do anything less?

I still cannot believe that I was in the Supreme Court and listening in person to Chief Justice Roberts speak. When asked about how he felt about previous decisions, he responded, "While it may sound glib, I don't look back. I make the best decision with the facts presented, and then go on." Decision-making was a recurring motif throughout Washington Week, and I take to heart his words. How I strive to, when faced with seemingly daunting and paralyzing decisions, make the best decision I can, and to remember to keep forging on.

Martha Raddatz opened her speech to us with a quote, "Courage is not the absence of fear, but instead the quality to determine that something else is more important." That resonated strongly with me. She spoke about being a journalist who prioritizes reporting wars, because she argues that wars display both the best and worst

of humanity. I realized the importance of those who would go to the conflict to report and inform about the tragedy of war, but also the triumph of the human spirit in the midst of conflict. Her speech, and our visit to the Newseum, made me realize how much I take for granted the people who sacrifice to make available the information and news I read, and how incredible it is to live in a country fundamentally rooted in the free press.

And it was so cool to meet Susan Gordon, Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence. She was the embodiment of cool. She told us that we are not stuck with the knowledge that we have, and that we are not just who we are presently, but rather who we are becoming. She told us to make decisions and be willing to accept the consequences of being wrong. She told us to keep our nose down and head up. Her intelligence, prudent candor, and engaging speech made me so proud to have a female role model like her in the highest levels of government.

But sometimes, my favorite memories were in the quiet moments.

I remember focusing in awe at the words engraved into the massive walls of the Lincoln Memorial and my own somber and gratitude-filled reflection amongst the sea of names imprinted on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

I remember looking around, sitting in the State Department Reception Room, the East Wing of the White House, or the Kennedy Caucus Room, and I had the distinct and overwhelmingly feeling rise up inside of me that one day in the future - the near future too - that these delegates and friends beside me will one day return to these spaces not as observers, but as active participants. They will be the ones hosting dinner parties and shaking admirers' hands, creating policy and leading the country. In those moments, and even now, I'm just so honored to have the opportunity to spend one week of my life with them, and I'm continually grateful to call them friends.

I remember the plane ride back to my home state of California. Tears were silently streaming down my face during takeoff, yet I was smiling. I was so devastated to leave the incredible experience of USSYP behind, but I also could not wait to talk about my experience with everyone at home so that maybe they could share some of the joy that I felt throughout the week.

But I realize now, that though I will never have an experience in my life quite like Washington Week, I carry USSYP – and friends who I met and found true kinship with, and the mentors who I will always strive to be more like – in my heart always. I will never forget this incredible, indescribable, and truly humbling experience, and I cannot thank USSYP enough for altering my life profoundly and irrevocably through exemplifying service, patriotism, and love.

From California with love,

Lauren Kong