

## Shannon Ryu, DODEA – 2019

It's been a month and I still can't even begin to articulate my incredible United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) experience, but I hope whatever feeble attempt I make to do so will propel you to the esteemed halls of the Mayflower Hotel.

I started my USSYP journey blindfolded: no past alumni connections, no faculty guidance, and absolutely no idea what to expect from Washington Week. Even after receiving notice of my acceptance, shuffling through my congratulations packet, and reading and rereading my press release, I never felt ready for USSYP. The truth is, it's fine not to feel ready for the greatest moments of your life; they spring up on you, you have a fantastic time, and then you treasure those spontaneous, unadulterated memories for the rest of your life.

But if you're like me and you like spoilers before movies and summaries of novels *before* reading them, here's a few things to expect:

1. The Hearst Foundations will pamper you, and you will bask in every moment of it.

It all started with the black SUV and our beloved USSYP bodyguard. Not just any black SUV, too; the kind with the tinted windows that you can't see through. Pulling up to the Mayflower in true POTUS fashion is only the beginning of the Hearst Foundations' generosity: the meals, the rooms, and the transportation trumped that of any I've experienced in my entire life. I found myself growing accustomed to the appetizer salads, the unique desserts, the *three forks*, and the ever-so-necessary coffee after every meal. I kept a tally in my Moleskine of every single time I declined a cup of coffee throughout the week, which amounted to a meager three cups left undrunk. The rooms were, as expected, spectacular, and the walls were decorated with the signatures of historical greats like Walt Disney, JFK, and more, which added to the feeling that I was part of this history. And of course, the coaches (notably Coach #3) were always vibrant with laughter and well-equipped with nut-free granola bars and water. As if I had room for refreshments, though; I was always stuffed.

2. Interacting with the speakers will both excite and inspire you.

Perhaps the pinnacle of my USSYP experience was on Tuesday inside of the Supreme Court building. After taking a photo on its steps, we filed into the seats of the fabled courtroom in *decreasing height order*, much to my dismay. I had prepared an arsenal of questions for Chief Justice Roberts, and I glanced anxiously at my watch with every question whilst furiously jotting down notes, praying that he'd call on the tiny Asian girl at the back of the room. After ten or so inquiries had been made, the air suddenly felt different. I felt a strange power. And sure enough, as I raised my hand for the eleventh time, Chief Justice Roberts peered above all of the outstretched hands to call on *me*. So like any other fangirl, I stammered through my question, all the while in awe by the fact that the most powerful man in the judicial branch had his undivided attention on an ordinary, unremarkable youth. It was at this moment that I realized the significance of USSYP: the next generation — the generation that is gearing up to take the country to new heights — is allowed a glimpse, a voice, and a chance to impact current America for future America.

3. The places you get to go are places most people never even dream of stepping foot.

Having a government-issued ID card on hand became second-nature during USSYP, and eventually, I could remove my coat, watch, bracelet, and Moleskine faster than you can say “security.” It’s one thing to look at pictures of the Supreme Court building, State Department Reception Rooms, Library of Congress, National Archives, Pentagon, Senate Gallery, and White House, but it’s next-level crazy to be inside, breathing the same air as American icons ranging from President John Adams to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Washington, D.C. is the birthplace of some of the greatest moments in history, and in that week I was both a witness and a maker.

4. The people you meet become lifelong companions and supporters.

Even from the first exchange, all of the delegates felt like old friends. We’d immediately burst into conversation about climate change, gun control, the electoral college, or better yet, burst into song by the grand piano (“Burn” from *Hamilton* became a personal favorite of mine). Ideas were challenged, perspectives were introduced, minds were changed, beliefs were defended, but never was there an atmosphere of belligerence or animosity. We thrived off of debate and conversation, and our unique perspectives enriched each others’ positions. Some of us will visit one another when traveling in the U.S. Some of us will meet up at the Alumni Reception. Some of us might even go to university with one another. And maybe one day, some of us will run for office together, or work alongside each other in the fateful city where we first met. But above all, the 103 delegates I had the honor of befriending will celebrate with me in good times, commiserate with me in difficult times, and support me in all of my endeavors, and I to them. The most life-changing thing about USSYP was that I met the people I was destined to be with.

I offer all of my gratitude to the kindness of the Hearst Foundations, the time and knowledge of all of the speakers, the wisdom and guidance of all of the Military Mentors, and to the delegates that molded my Washington Week into what it was. I will never forget the lessons learned, people met, and memories made in Washington, D.C, and I one day hope to pay it all back to the country that raised me. I got a glimpse of the future in the Grand Ballroom, and I firmly declare that it is going to be bright, dynamic, bold, and absolutely stellar.