

## Emma Watts, ID – 2019

An opportunity of a lifetime arrived in a large white express envelope, embellished with orange and black graphics and delivered by UPS. The return address was LYNN at USSYP and it was addressed to me! I held my breath as I opened it and removed the announcement inside. It read: “Congratulations! On behalf of your United States Senators and the Hearst Foundations, we commend you for having been selected as one of two delegates to represent your state at the 57th annual United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) to be held in Washington, DC, March 2-9, 2019.” I read those lines over and over again until I was convinced it was true. Two months later, I was greeted by my Military Mentor at the Washington-Reagan National Airport and began an adventure I’ll never forget! Even today I have to pinch myself to believe Washington Week really happened!

My week in Washington was something I could never have imagined beforehand. Overall it was an ineffable experience...by definition, “one that cannot be described in words.” I saw as much marble in one week as one would expect to see in a lifetime! This wasn’t just a tour of Washington, D.C. I had a first-hand look at how government works through our powerful institutions, and I met real government celebrities who’ve been streamed through media. As we moved through the week’s agenda of inspirational speeches by national leaders, I experienced a gamut of emotions. These speeches often challenged my previously held understandings and beliefs and raised thought-provoking questions.

One of my favorite speakers was Brian Kamoie, an Associate Administrator for Mission Support, FEMA. He asked a question that gave me a jolt – “What will you do with your wild, precious life? The question was unsettling. I realized I didn’t have an answer yet, and next year I’m facing high school graduation! Then, Mr. Kamoie kindly relieved my stress with a simple roadmap. “If you want to get where you want to go, you have to do three things: commit to serve, think big, and take bold action.” This suggested to me that I can shape my “precious, wild, life”— the one I aspire to – through service. I just have to enlarge my visions of happier, healthier communities at home and around the world and have the courage to advocate and work hard for those visions. I recently spoke at a Heart of the West Junior Civitan conference and shared Mr. Kamoie’s roadmap with other high schoolers, encouraging them to make a difference with their “wild, precious lives” through their Junior Civitan service groups. I concluded my presentation with one of Mr. Kamoie’s most powerful reminders – “Service is not self-service.”

It would be difficult to choose which speakers or events I liked best. However, the camaraderie and sharing among the delegates was one of the most valuable aspects of the program. I loved being surrounded by energetic peers who give a voice to the future of our country and world. Initially, delegates got to know each other through small-talk about our families, school activities, and individual interests like hobbies or music preferences. We discovered how other delegates were engaged in the greater good of their communities and their plans after high school. Often because of the impact of the day, conversations shifted to political-talk. Topics varied from the New Green Deal to occurrences along the U.S.-Mexican border. One particularly passionate discussion over lunch stands out in my memory. There was polite disagreement about whether to completely wipe out the Electoral College, reform it, or keep it as is, but we all left the table more informed about the issue. The diversity within the group allowed me to become familiar with a broad range of perspectives and worldviews. We learned about the challenges faced by the government in different states and geographical areas and discussed different solutions to those concerns. I developed strong bonds with my

roommate and some of the other delegates and was saddened when Washington Week came to a close. I will never forget the student farewell speeches and singing of “Lean on Me” in unison with 103 other delegates. However, in an age of social media, I’m grateful to be able to continue my connections and friendships.

Washington Week was almost perfect. I did develop a blister on my right foot despite wearing comfortable walking shoes, and I carelessly left my new gloves in the Supreme Court, but these things are insignificant. Some of the highlights of Washington Week which I will never forget are: shaking Senator Richard Blumenthal’s hand and being offered an internship; being surrounded by many intelligent and courageous young women on International Women’s Day; visiting the Newseum which reminded me of the importance of the First Amendment and free press to our democracy; and receiving a beautifully engraved “United States Senate Youth Program Certificate of Scholarship.” Having this opportunity to attend Washington Week has forever changed my concept of the world I’m living in. Through this experience, I have developed a new appreciation and love for my country, its history, institutions, and government.

I’d like to express my deepest gratitude to the United States Senate Youth Program, including the government officials, speakers, military mentors, and other staff who worked tirelessly to make Washington Week a huge success. And a special thank you to the Hearst Foundations and its staff who funded the program and made it all possible!