

Travis Johnson, SC – 2019

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please?"

Washington Week, to me, was powerful and transformative. I will never forget arriving in Washington, D.C. knowing that I would be embarking on a journey of a lifetime. As a young child, I always saw politicians on television and asked myself, "Will I ever get a chance to meet them?" Never in a million years would I imagine, as a teenager, being able to sit in the chambers of the Supreme Court and have the opportunity to ask the Chief Justice questions. Serving as a Delegate to the 2019 United States Senate Youth Program was a humbling experience I will never forget. I will forever cherish the lessons learned, memories made, and bonds developed. Most importantly, I will never forget what this week taught me. It taught me importance of dialogue with others, respecting everyone's viewpoints, and understanding that everyone has different upbringings and social surroundings that influence their opinions. Washington Week also reminded me of the significance of fundamental values, such as hard-work, determination, perseverance, and equality. This week reaffirmed my commitment to public service and strengthened my desire to seek a career in public service to help the greatest number of individuals, and society.

Upon entry into the Mayflower Hotel on the first day of Washington Week, my faith in America's future grew. Spending the week with 103 delegates who each have a genuine passion to change the world was heartwarming and caused me to become more optimistic about our nation's future leaders. Every debate about policies or social issues, while contentious at times, ended in civility, and we all grew as leaders. These debates allowed us to increase our knowledge of issues and gave us the opportunity to articulate our beliefs. The United States Senate Youth Program was a tremendous learning experience, and from every conversation I had with a delegate, I learned more about them, their upbringing, and why they held certain policy positions. To me, USSYP was more than meeting new friends and learning more about our government, but it was a journey that allowed me the opportunity to add more members into my family—members who share similar interests about our nation.

It would be an injustice to discuss USSYP without discussing the incredible speakers and powerful site visits. Never would I, a boy from a small town in South Carolina, ever imagine eating dinner near the United States Constitution. Never would I imagine being able to ask Senator Richard Blumenthal a question about gun control. My heart began to flutter, and my palms began to sweat as the Senator pointed in my direction. Never would I imagine raising my hand to answer a question from the President of the United States and being the first person he calls upon. Never, in a million years, would I imagine I would have an opportunity to shake hands with the President of the United States. The United States Senate Program made each of these events a reality, and for that, I am forever appreciative and humbled. Every single moment of Washington Week was momentous. The United States Senate Youth Program, in essence, is highly reminiscent of obtaining the American Dream.

I will forever cherish the memories made during Washington Week. This program reminded me why it's important to engage in political activism, because if we truly love our country, we should be willing to work relentlessly to improve it. As Secretary Ben Carson said, "Use your influence in a positive way." As delegates, I challenge and encourage everyone to utilize every-thing we learned in Washington to change the world and make it a better place for everyone. We must remember to always speak truth to power and never be afraid to stand up and speak out against injustice. Washington Week exceeded my expectations, and there was never a dull moment. We entered the Mayflower Hotel as friends, and departed as family members. We laughed, debated, and cried together. We grew together and left Washington ready to tackle problems in our communities. I am forever grateful for this opportunity. From the bottom of my heart, thank you to the Hearst Foundation, Military Mentors, and my fellow delegates for making this week one I will never forget.