

Rylee Niesent, SD – 2019

As I walk through my hometown of Spearfish, South Dakota, I have the luxury of knowing nearly everyone because of its small size. I notice the friendly midwestern mannerisms and the predominant cultural and ideological identity that seems to encompass the entire town and most of the region. Heading home from the heart of town means a seven-mile car ride through alfalfa fields and cow pastures.

Since a young age I have had a deep interest in government. My enthusiasm was cultivated by my involvement in civic opportunities locally which inspired me to broaden my participation at the national level. That particular goal was achieved when I was chosen to represent South Dakota in the United States Senate Youth Program. This is an extremely rigorous program that brings 104 individuals from across the United States and its territories to Washington, D.C.

Having the extraordinary opportunity to listen to our nation's leaders greatly influenced me. Their insight proved to be very beneficial especially to the future of America — our youth. Their messages to us have shown me not only the value of compromise, but also the importance of understanding where the other side is coming from, as well as the backgrounds that allows such perspectives to form. The polarization of the modern-day political world has created an environment that taught me the necessity of avoiding partisan politics and why I must promote compromise in a world that greatly needs it. I observed the political systems that make up our government — learned from their mistakes — and now hope to apply my newfound knowledge in the years to come.

Being required to coexist with people from an array of backgrounds made it necessary for me to quickly adapt to the new lifestyle. While I have grown up witnessing the cultivation of crops and the branding of cattle, my fellow delegates have been riding subways and walking amongst skyscrapers their entire lives. The basic concepts that I always assumed to be universal from city to city were completely different; from how traffic flows to the housing people lived in. The ability to fully emerge into a new way of life and learn from both my fellow delegates and the entire population of D.C. was something truly extraordinary. While this was extremely beneficial to my personal growth, I made certain that I wouldn't betray my roots as they are what make me who I am. I also acquired the skill of listening to others' perspectives and learned to allow them to reshape my own views while still holding close my morals and principles.

When starting the United States Senate Youth Program I naturally assumed I would leave D.C. with a lot of new knowledge about civic service, but never imagined I would gain as much valuable information regarding myself. Learning the importance of compromise has proven to be an extremely useful concept especially in today's society. Perhaps the most applicable skill I learned was the ability to recognize diversity and its importance in the decisionmaking process. Every person has their own set of strong beliefs built from their unique perspective and backgrounds; when we put each and every view together we build something bigger and greater than any individual could ever imagine.