

Erin Tims, KS – 2025

The United States Senate Youth Program was not something I dreamed of doing as a child. I eventually applied for USSYP because one of the delegates from the 62nd Senate Youth Program, someone I consider a dear friend, peer-pressured me into applying, and I did. I knew going in that my application was a long-shot; I had no expectation of getting in, just an itty, bitty bit of hope. When I received the long-awaited email, my jaw almost hit the floor. After months of anticipation and dread, I finally allowed myself to think of the friends I would make, the places I would go, and the knowledge I would gain. What I got from the 63rd Annual United States Senate Youth Program was a respect for our service members, this country, and an understanding that I must live for more than myself.

When I arrived in D.C., my group was greeted by the Military Mentors, and I understood that I was in the safest of hands. They went out of their way to be kind, hospitable, and genuine. As USSYP is one of my memories that stands out among the rest, I realize how incredible the Military Mentors are. Throughout the week, I found myself asking for their opinions on our schedule, speakers, and world events. Their unique viewpoints were formed by equally unique lives. Even though they are all human beings with their own thoughts and opinions, they are all able to put their beliefs aside in order to look at things objectively and do what needs to be done: a skill that I deeply admire. Each mentor leads a noteworthy life, and despite their fundamental differences, I found that they all are driven by an unparalleled passion and respect for this country. One of the week's recurrent themes was living a dedicated life to public service, which every delegate seemed to already plan on doing. However, I think I can say with confidence that the Military Mentors are the embodiment of a commitment to public service. One of the most vivid memories I have from USSYP is when we visited the National Portrait Gallery. I sat next to Captain Bean while eating the best sandwich I've ever had in my entire life, and I listened while he told some of his military horror stories. I jokingly asked him if they made him sign a waiver, and he told me that you essentially sign a waiver for your life when you join the military. Until then, I had never thought of it that way, and it suddenly dawned on me how brave he, and every other service member, is.

It wasn't until the 2nd full day of the program that it sunk in that I was actually there. I recognized this when Brian Kamoie, a USSYP alum, repeatedly said, "You belong here." I felt like he x-rayed my soul. Somewhere in my mind, I thought I was dreaming or there by mistake. Being from a small, rural community in the smack-dab middle of nowhere, an opportunity like USSYP is exceptionally hard to come by. When I thought of how I got there, I thought of my community. A hardworking, uplifting, kind community. During the week, I learned more than I could have possibly imagined, but there was one lesson in particular that I've kept very close to my heart. While at the White House, I struck up a conversation with JB, Jonathan Bissell, the resident USSYP Master of Ceremonies. He put me on the spot and basically asked me to sum up my life and what I found important, and I mentioned my volunteer work and the insight that it gave me into the hardships that many people face every day. After listening to my spiel, we talked about how enlightening it is to grow a different perspective and understand that everyone lives a life entirely different from your own. He told me that there was one particular bible verse he used to remind himself of this: "There but for the grace of God, go I" (1 Corinthians 15:10). On the way to the White House, there was a homeless man on the street asking for money; JB mentioned that there was really nothing that inherently separated either of us from being in that man's situation, and that we should use the tools we're given to do as much good as we can. For the remainder of the week, I saw everything differently. When we went to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, JB's speech echoed in my head. The people in that cemetery were laid to rest there because they had laid down their lives for this country, and there is almost nothing that separates them from myself. I hope that, someday, I can say with pride that I served my country like they have.

Ultimately, USSYP made me realize that this country is filled with so many incredible people that are worth doing anything and everything for. While America may not be perfect, I have the chance to do good for this country. I may not be destined for the military like the Military Mentors I so admire, but I do believe that I am destined for public service, and I will do all that I am capable of to dedicate the life I have been given for others.