

Some people, some places, and some moments have the rare power to change the trajectory of our lives. When I received a congratulatory email on an unassuming December evening, I grew excited for the opportunity to learn about American democracy first-hand. Yet, one month after attending USSYP, I now realize that the program has taught me much more about myself than anything else.

### **I Deserve to Dream Big**

Lieutenant George Denove of the United States Navy, my Military Mentor, is a legend: he studied at USNA, then MIT, and now travels the world in nuclear-powered submarines conducting cryptologic warfare. Yet, beyond the impressive resume and casual 7-mile morning runs, Lt. Denove has a dream: to become an astronaut. Skeptical, I remember asking him, “Now, how do you plan on getting there?” To my surprise, he showed me his notebook. A meticulously detailed plan, with dates, requirements, and notes from an interview with a former astronaut all lined the pages. Then, when we visited NASA’s headquarters and heard from four astronauts, Lt. Denove furiously took notes. Not only does he have a dream, but he has a plan to achieve that dream, I realized. See, the thing that seemed so astonishing about this was that I had dreams too, but I never made plans to reach them. Truth is, this whole time I discounted myself; I told myself that I don’t deserve to dream. Even throughout the week, I felt imposter syndrome at times—did I really belong at THE United States Senate Youth Program, with all these accomplished students? As delegates, we heard one quote twice during Washington Week: “What is it you plan to do with your one *wild* and *precious* life?” The first time was when Mr. Brian Kamoie posed it to us on Monday morning. At the time, I wrote it down, but didn’t think much of it. The second time was on Friday night, when Ms. Guilford ended the very last speech of the very last dinner of the 63<sup>rd</sup> USSYP with that same question. Then, it finally made sense. Lt. Denove dreamt so big because he understood that not doing so would be to waste the wildness and preciousness of our lives. That night, I discovered that by the sheer fact that I have one—just one *wild* and *precious* life—I deserve to dream big. I deserve to uphold the wildness and preciousness of this life.

### **“How will you live yours?”**

The noisy Coach 3 quickly dims to silence as our Military Mentors announce we are entering Arlington National Cemetery. One by one, they solemnly reminisce about friends and fellow soldiers buried here. A quiet but persistent sniffing begins—lips wobbling, a fellow delegate is overcome with emotion. Her father is a Naval air traffic controller stationed in Sasebo, Japan, she explains. Passing the vast array of graves affirms to her that the sacrifices her father makes each day—which sometimes causes him to miss important milestones in her life—truly do matter. I attempt to comfort her, but I can’t find the words. Coming from a family without members in the armed services, I don’t immediately relate. Yet, as I walk through the Cemetery alongside her, I feel something I’ve never felt before. A little voice tells me: “the brave men and women buried here lived lives of purpose, lives of meaning, and lives of service—how will you live yours?” As someone at the beginning of their journey, I often debate which career path I want to go down. However, on that chilly March Friday morning, surrounded by white headstones stretching endlessly into the horizon, I knew that I wanted nothing more than to lead a life as meaningful as those buried in Arlington. I know, without a doubt in my mind, that I will live a life of service.

### **Fried Chicken Taught Me the Power of Vulnerability**

It’s late. The USSYP curfew is quickly approaching, but we don’t even notice. The eleven of us have been in this hotel room for the past three hours. Over D.C. Fried Chicken and Mumbo sauce, we’ve been playing Joshua’s game of “We’re Not Really Strangers.” Each card is a deeper, more vulnerable question. Most of us have never gotten this transparent with people we met just days ago. Yet, for me, this is oddly cathartic. For a group of teenage boys to share their insecurities, doubts, and personal challenges with each other rarely occurs; but we did. Vulnerability, I learn, humanizes us—the Fried Chicken Boys have vowed to play another game of “We’re Not Really Strangers” at every USSYP reunion. However, the deep connections I made at USSYP extended beyond this group of boys. On every bus ride, meal, and walk I found people—*my people*. The proof of the bonds I made that week lies in what came after: tears, lots of them. It’s truly a special phenomenon to make such tight-knit friendships in just seven days. I know that the people I met at the program will be *my people* for decades to come.

It is with pure gratitude that I thank the Hearst Foundations for graciously funding my USSYP experience and scholarship; Lt. Denove and the 16 other Military Mentors that taught me invaluable lessons about life and service; every speaker that selflessly offered their time and expertise for us to learn about public service, democracy, and our institutions; the Maryland Department of Education, Senator Van Hollen, and Senator Alsobrooks for helping me represent Maryland; Ms. Guilford, Ms. DeSmet, (THE) Mr. JB, and Ms. Wilks for curating such a transformative experience; Mr. Jakub Mosur and Ms. Erin Lubin for photographing the people, places, and moments that have and will continue change the trajectory of our lives; the incredible hotel and dining staff at the Mayflower Hotel and our wonderful Coach drivers; Sebastian, my awesome Nevadan roommate, whom I had intellectual 2 AM discussions with; and most of all, the 103 fellow Delegates of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Annual United States Senate Youth Program.