

Tasnim Basha, MI – 2025

“Delegates and Distinguished guests... Welcome! To the 63rd annual United States Senate Youth Program.” - Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Brissel (JB), student activities Director. This quote was one that I was excited to hear every morning, after every break, and before every speaker and event throughout Washington Week.

My trip to the Senate Youth Program started back in the fall of my senior year. Amidst every internal exam, and college app I had to work on, Senate Youth certainly took the spotlight of my thoughts. When I received the notification of my selection (which came out a bit later than other delegates'), I jumped up and down shaking and screaming. I had convinced myself that I am getting rejected given the timeline of my notification. I must say, that scare certainly made every part of the stressful journey to being selected worth it.

After that, it was a matter of days. Nothing else mattered, I just counted the days down until Washington week. 53 days ... 52 ... 51 ... 50 (they were about as boring and hard to get through as this sentence). Finally, after what seemed like eternity, there was 1 day left till Washington week. Even though that day seemed longer than the 50 others I had to wait for, it was full of nerves that made me enjoy every single moment of it. Running last minute errands with my dad, as he watched me try on all the silly sunglasses to pick one that matched my outfits best.

It was then that my dad felt like his sacrifices as an immigrant paid off, he saw a chance for a better future through the sunglasses I put on my eyes. **I knew Senate Youth was going to be great, but what was greater is that it brought both me, and my entire family the hope for a better future. It gave us the vision for success, that just because I'm low income and I have no support, I can still achieve and build upon my dreams. In fact, USSYP helped me dream. “Dream bigger, reach higher, use the lead balloons that tie down as weights to build yourself up.”**

Fast forward to my travel day. If there's one thing my fellow delegates will always remember me by is that I was the kid with the worst travel experience. On my way to DC, I wasn't allowed to board the plane, as I had arrived 5 minutes later than my boarding time (they were still boarding though) and someone else had taken my seat. My mascara never looked more miserable after that. I panicked as I tried to figure out how I could get to DC.

With a quick call to the phone number USSYP provided for help during travel, I was still able to make it to DC. The staff were more than patient, kind, and warm with their interactions. I was well comforted (my mascara was wiped clean), and my flight was rebooked within a span of minutes. Yet, I was still welcomed by my peers as “the girl who got kicked off her flight.” Although I felt nervous at the time, this will certainly go down in my diary as one of my most memorable and funny experiences.

Once I arrived at the airport, I was welcomed by Lieutenant Commander Niemann, one of the awesome Military Mentors. Commander Niemann became one of the best mentors for me. Whether it was bonding over Arabic language, her experience in Bahrain, or her overall insights, she has always made me feel nothing but great. Even after Washington Week, Commander Niemann and I stayed in touch, chatting about colleges, life, and everything about Auburn (the college).

One aspect I wasn't aware about USSYP was the presence of Military Mentors. The Military Mentors' support on and after the program was unforgettable, they became the extended family, support, and guidance I never truly had. Lieutenant Denove is another prime example of this. He patiently handled my cries over college rejections, and my excitement over the acceptances. As I send him my random life updates, he continuously cheers me on.

“Blossom where you're planted” Lieutenant Denove would say to me after my rejections. This quote was enough condolence for me throughout the rest of my college admissions process. Lieutenant Denove and Commander Niemann are only two examples of all the honorary mentors we had. Lieutenant Colonel Hensly and her constant words of affirmation for me, Major Spencer (go army!) and every single Military Mentor present at Washington Week, all showed me what it means to serve the people not only by defending them, but by showing all forms of kindness to them.

Aside from the awesome connections I created with everyone at USSYP, the immersion experience in politics was another thing I will forever be grateful for. I knew before I came to the USSYP that I wanted to be a Foreign Service Officer. One of the experiences was having the privilege of sitting at a VIP table with Secretary Rubio and the Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Global Public Affairs Ms. Michele Exner. Both are figures that are in positions I dream to be part of in my future. To be able to meet them, yet more, sit at a VIP table with them was an extraordinary experience I can never describe. I certainly cried way too much. The moment felt surreal. I also got the opportunity to meet both of my Senators, another surreal experience. Aside from the emotions attached with it, I was also able to network for possible future internships positions and career opportunities. Needless to say, a new world of doors, one I didn't think I had the keys to, opened up to me thanks to USSYP.

Not only did I get the keys to new doors, but the vision for how I can interact in policy. By learning from NASA astronauts, Chefs, Judges and Senators, I was able to see how policy, and impact can be made in so many different ways. Furthermore, by also visiting places like the National Archives, the US Institute of Peace, the Pentagon, and the Department of Defense, we were able to learn about changemakers from history and hear from ones that are currently making history. That's one thing USSYP will teach you, that there's no one role, or way to make change, sometimes it's just a smile that makes someone's day.

The smiles all the delegates had on throughout USSYP were ones that definitely created a lasting change within me. From Fashion Diva poses, to our food account, and talking about our class mascot, the pegg, we had so much to bond with. When we didn't have a topic of conversation, we created one. Many nights during our short breaks, we'd sit together and look at what the newest national news was and discuss our opinions about them. Thanks to our amazing photographers, Jakub Mosur and Erin Lubin, all of these moments were captured perfectly on camera to remain as forever memories.

Speaking of memories, one cannot forget to mention the bus rides and karaoke we did all throughout our time. I still remember the tears everybody cried on the last bus ride to a hotel we, for one week, called "home."

"Delegates and Distinguished Guests, this now concludes our Washington Week events for the 63rd annual United States Senate Youth Program" - JB. JB was more than a Student Activities Director, as he was one of the most caring people I met in USSYP, and was the best person to start our day every day. Despite my love for him, I will have to say that the best thing he ever said is "Delegates and Distinguished guests...Lunch is now served" as another USSYP highlight for everyone tends to be the food.

USSYP delegates did not want that day to end, despite what JB had to say. We threw a party, stayed up all night, both crying and laughing with a negligible desire to depart and say our goodbyes. USSYP is truly nothing less than life changing and mind opening once in a lifetime experience, I will forever be grateful I had the opportunity of experiencing.

7 days, 168 hours, 10080 minutes, and 604800 seconds. Sounds long in numbers, but passes by as a fraction of a second. One I loved every part endlessly, and will forever be grateful for it. Our Military Mentors, delegates, Ms. DeSmet, our security guards, nurse, and every other individual that took part in USSYP are ones to never be forgotten.

Delegates and Distinguished guests, (and to everyone reading this), go on, and do something great with your "one precious and wild life." Know that you are all loved. Your smiles and kindness will change the world.

With Love,

- That one girl who got kicked off of her flight, Tasnim.