

## Katherine Marie Sanders, AR - 2015

What makes America great? The answer is not our massive corporations, educational system, or military might. The answer is the individuals who strive to create a more perfect union -- leaders who revolutionize the way we conduct business, educate our children, and fight to preserve the freedoms we all cherish. These determined souls are the reason our democracy has been so successful.

The leaders I had the honor of listening to during Washington Week were people I assumed I would only see on television or read about in magazines. I heard inspiring speeches from high ranking individuals who worked in every branch of government as well as leaders of global organizations, gaining an inside look at their jobs and their lives in the process. In many respects, the latter is why this is such a unique opportunity. Media often dehumanizes these greatly accomplished men and women; therefore, being able to hear their opinions, uninterrupted by news reporters, taught me more than their Wikipedia articles ever could.

The people behind the podium were not my not only sources of inspiration, however. The 103 brilliant delegates I met during Washington Week seemed extremely dedicated to improving their communities through volunteer service; some of the organizations they founded have already made an impact on the national level. Being able to sit around the table with these young leaders and discuss everything from Hillary Clinton's chances in 2016 to tax reform to Beyoncé's greatest hits is an experience that I didn't even know was possible before I stepped into the Mayflower Hotel. Since these students came from all over the country, I was also exposed to views unlike those I hear daily in Arkansas. Being around such a diverse group of passionate young people and hearing their ideas have made me a more conscientious and well-rounded individual. Thanks to modern technology, I have been able to keep up with all of my friends. I can't wait to see them again someday, whether in person or on a television screen.

The USSYP experience would not be complete, however, without the dedicated staff, sponsors, and Military Mentors. USSYP has been the most organized week of my life thus far. In past experiences with camps, I've gotten bored with an excessive amount of free time or exasperated by my groups' tardiness to planned activities. Washington Week was not at all like those camps. The schedule was jam-packed but we were never late to anything, even if it meant that we had to literally run up Capitol Hill in heels. Every night I was exhausted -- but in the best possible way. I cannot begin to explain how much of an asset the Military Mentors were to this experience. LCDR Toler was the mentor for my group and she really helped to make "The Squad" a family. I learned a lot and laughed a lot thanks to the men and women in uniform who accompanied us throughout the week.

Washington, D.C. is a beautiful city. The sights, sounds, and tastes of USSYP will not fade from my memory for a very long time. However, the most treasured part for me will always be the knowledge I gained and the people I met.