

Ben Beltran, CA - 2015

Humbling, eye-opening, informative, and life-changing. These adjectives are the best words I can use to describe my experience as the California delegate for the U.S. Senate Youth Program.

It was an honor to get accepted to this prestigious program, so I can vividly remember receiving the call from the state education department telling me that I had been selected to represent California as a delegate. I was stunned. It was a great opportunity to expand my knowledge in politics to become a more well-rounded individual.

Weeks before the program, I read as much literature on politics as I could to update my knowledge on news and world events, and I began to take a more active role in discussions and research in my Government class. I was primarily a STEM oriented student who did outreach work to my local Latino community, so I had never extensively paid attention to the current news and world events. I had also never really considered becoming a politician or public servant, but, after weeks of working hard to understand the current players in politics and issues that our country is facing, I realized that I was enjoying what I was learning about. I was even more excited for the absolutely incredible agenda that was planned for the delegates for the U.S. Senate Youth Program.

When I got there, I was unsure of what to expect. I had little real background in political involvement, but I was excited to be challenged. It was no surprise then that as I met other people, I was instantly humbled and inspired by the caliber of the students that I was around. I heard about people who were already entrepreneurs, non-profit leaders, and cancer cell researchers. It created an environment where I had the opportunity to meet and talk to the future leaders of various different fields in America. It was an environment that did nothing but inspire me and open my eyes to the diverse interests of some of the brightest minds aiming for public service.

Along with sharing company with some of the brightest young minds in America, I had the opportunity to hear from incredible speakers who shared their wisdom and insights on what it takes to be a public servant.

The one memory that still seems incredibly surreal was the moment when the delegates had a banquet at the national archives in close proximity to the very documents that are the foundation of the government that many of the students around me would like to participate in. On top of that, we had the one of the Georgia senators speaking to us.

There were a plethora of other moments that I can never forget such as hearing NASA discuss their research, watching important senators walk into the Kennedy Caucus Room, having Supreme Court Justice Breyer sign his personal constitution for my Government teacher, snapping a selfie with the Swedish ambassador, and spending time with my friends at the hotel.

Throughout this whirlwind of events, something was becoming clear to me. I kept on considering what my role might be in the political system. From entering this program with no real interest in one day seeking office, I was inspired by the speakers and those around me to consider becoming a part of the political system. It was eye-opening. I was no longer so focused on engineering but instead I realized that public service is an honor and one of the best ways to serve those around you. As Senator Joe Manchin said, "Public service is not self-service". I learned it's not a goal to be attained but an honor to be bestowed. Capitol Hill needs leaders who are more interested in representing the interests of their constituents and staying honorable to their principles. America doesn't need leaders interested in increasing polarization and allowing for ego and not principle to rule their decision making.

After this program, I knew that I could be a part of this change. I realized that if I were to live my life to the highest standard then I could earn a role as a public servant if I am chosen by my peers. I can only thank the U.S. Senate Youth Program, the Hearst Foundations, and my fellow delegates for this insight as I open my interests and seek to live my life in a way that one day may merit for me to be elected to public office. In the end, the goal is not the attainment of wealth and power but the opportunity to serve and empower others through public office.