

Jenna Wong, MA – 2015

When I reflect back on my experience in the United States Senate Youth Program, I think of one quote that stuck with me through the week. I heard it at dinner one night from Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, after an exhausting and jam-packed day of activity. I was surrounded by some of the brightest youth in the nation, people I have no doubt will go on to excel in every field, and that I'll excitedly announce "I know them!" when I see their faces on TV in ten years. USSYP, quite frankly, attracts the overachievers of America. We are the debaters, scientists, and scholars that I am told give the older generations hope for our future. Yet the thing I remember most is hearing Senator Manchin say, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." I was sleep deprived and in a food coma following a delicious three course dinner, but somehow this line jerked me out of my stupor.

I was hardly the most impressive delegate in that room, where eleven had gotten into Harvard early, and conversations about bipartisanship were more common than ones on Taylor Swift (for the record, she's my role model). Everyone around me seemed so confident and sure of their futures - they had reason to be. But the moments I'll remember from Washington Week aren't the intellectually stimulating conversations or engaging speakers, as wonderful as they were. Nor do I consider USSYP a simple line to add to an already glowing resume. I'll remember USSYP because it taught me that all these accomplishments, college acceptances, and awards pale in comparison to a very simple goal: showing you care.

We live in a world where politicians stay huddled in their lavish offices, shutting out the real world. This isn't the way it was meant to work. Washington is a beautiful yet peculiar city, and as I was granted inside access to the most secure and glamorous venues in the world - the State Department Dining Room, the Supreme Court, the White House - all I could think was how every American deserved the same opportunity. I believe that USSYP's aim isn't to isolate us from the real and often difficult experiences of America, but to give us the courage to go out and confront them head on.

The most impactful experience of my week was on the last day walking through the Arlington National Cemetery. I saw rows upon rows of headstones lined up with military precision as though their soldier occupants were standing guard even after death. I thought about how every name carved into those stones had a whole life behind it. Yet they now stood united as one, because everyone in that cemetery had shown how much they cared.

I don't know if I or any of my friends from USSYP will one day occupy the White House, the Supreme Court, or the Senate. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter. We could be janitors or justices, painters or presidents. To be good Americans, all we need to do is to care about our families, our communities, and our country.