

Catherine Zhang, PA - 2015

Washington Week. Every time I hear those words, I cannot help but break into the biggest smile. And now, whenever I hear someone is a USSYP alumni, I cannot help but contain my excitement knowing we instantly have a connection. This week for me was indescribable, and it seems so cliché to say, but it was truly transformative for me, as I learned about my passions, shaped my interests, and began discovering myself.

I was never someone who was extremely interested in politics — I did not keep up nearly enough with current domestic and foreign affairs, I could not tell you the presidents in order, and I certainly never envisioned myself working in Washington, D.C.. I did, however, have a love for serving others and my community, and this passion was echoed throughout the entire week. I heard my own morals and ideals resound in the many amazing speakers we listened to, and what I found in D.C. was not the negative stereotypical image of politicians, but instead, motivated individuals who have dedicated their lives to public service and who are genuinely passionate about making a change in this world. I confess: I bawled my eyes out the first night after hearing Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia speak to us. It probably seemed so out of the ordinary — in fact, a fellow delegate stopped to ask me if my grandma had died because tears were just streaming down my face. The truth is, though, I was so moved by the real human connection I saw, that in that moment, I could see myself in public service, taking this path to make a positive impact. The tears were a response to my overwhelming happiness, and this feeling that I could make a difference in this world only continued throughout the week.

And even though I was not nearly getting enough sleep as usual, there was never a point where I felt low on energy because we would either be engrossed in a speaker's words or chatting excitedly with fellow delegates on the bus or in the hotel ballroom. But certainly one of the most unique and eye-opening parts for me was receiving guidance from the Military Mentors. They were each responsible for a group of the students, and honestly, they have showed me what it means to truly serve one's country. Through talking with them during meals and while waiting in lines, it hit me how selfless their work is: they would be willing to, without a doubt, take a bullet for you. Let that sink in for a second because I certainly had to let it. And beyond that, these mentors were some of the most kind-hearted, silly, caring – not to mention tall (just imagine a 5'2" girl standing next to a 6'5" Marine; people thought he was a statue!) – and just all-around amazing people I have ever met. Some of my favorite moments came from joking around with them: making up silly handshakes, learning how to properly squat, and hearing their inspiring personal stories.

Most importantly though, the extraordinary youth involved with this program were some of the most inspiring people I could have ever asked to surround myself with. The delegates came from all walks of life, bringing their own opinions during the week, and as we shared our different backgrounds, viewpoints, and stories with each other, we grew closer as a family and as individuals. Too often, I hear my peers talk negatively of the future, and it's true, we still have many problems to solve, but a cynical mindset that we can't change what is happening is the very same obstacle that hinders change. After spending this week in Washington, however, I know that this change will happen because of the inspiring and committed youth I met there. It is unbelievable the friendships you form during the week, and just how strong they are. When I went up to Boston two weeks later, I met up with both my fellow Montana and Maine delegate who also were in the area, and we spent two afternoons just catching up, as if time and distance had vanished between us. I undoubtedly consider them—along with the 103 other people there—another family. As I look through the pictures from the week, I happily remember them as some of the best moments of my life.

I could honestly talk about this program forever, with all the love and gratitude and passion I could possibly muster. But instead, I will close with one of my favorite quotes of the week: "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." There is no doubt in my mind that everybody involved in Washington Week will change this world, for as Dr. Suess once said, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." I could not be more grateful for this opportunity, and I certainly can never thank everybody enough, for giving me the experience of a lifetime.