

Hannah Robbins, AR – 2016

Washington is a mess. Government shutdowns, refused confirmation hearings, and polarization that prevents compromise are constants in the news. The Republican presidential frontrunner has insulted more than half of the United States population and yet I have hope. I found 103 other individuals who aren't willing to let their political party define them, instead they're ready to debate the issues and work towards a real solution.

It started with an envelope from The Hearst Foundations. I was at school when my mother received the envelope in the mail and texted me about it, but I had to wait almost nine hours to find out whether I was accepted or not. *Was I a delegate? No, my interview and test scores weren't good enough,* I thought. *Mom said it was the thick envelope. They want to let you down easy.* After marching in the local Christmas parade as drum major, I was finally able to go home and open my envelope. As I read aloud "Congratulations! On behalf of your United States Senators and The Hearst Foundations we commend you for having been selected..." I could not believe my eyes. I had never imagined I was going to be selected.

I still couldn't believe it as I walked into my room at the Mayflower and met my roommate. When I met Ellie McDonald, I knew that I was going to enjoy everything about USSYP. The nights in our room were spent debating abortion, the true meaning of a natural born citizen, and immigration, among other topics, and I knew after we were done we would watch Fox, CNN, or something on Lifetime and go to sleep. This was the atmosphere at USSYP. We were all politically-minded teenagers, but teenagers just the same. One minute we could be arguing about affirmative action and the next whatever sports team came up. Every meal was an opportunity to sit with new people and get a new perspective, whether it was with something a military mentor said, a fellow delegate, or one of the other USSYP guests that sat with us.

From our first speaker Jeffrey Herbst to our last John Kirby, each told us we were the future of our country, with President Obama even suggesting we should take the current Senate's place. The speakers we heard believed in us, and that belief resonated with each one of us, creating a program I will never forget. I will remember sitting anxiously as Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg walked into the room to speak to us, the energy as the founder of C-SPAN Brian Lamb asked us to tell about our heroes, the stories Judge Henry told us, and the thunderous applause from every single person, regardless of political party, as President Barack Obama walked into the East Room. I will remember the advice they told us: CEO of the Newseum Jeffrey Herbst wishing that everyone read news from all sources, the *Washington Post's* Jonathan Capehart telling us to read the article before we tweet it, and Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz telling us to find good mentors and never let them go.

Every experience we had was due to the generosity of The Hearst Foundations, and for that, I know I am so grateful. During our week in Washington, we were told that our scholarship was doubled from \$5,000 to \$10,000. This stunning announcement shows just how much The Hearst Foundations believes in us, and I know that the class of the 54th annual United States Senate Youth Program will do so much with that belief. We are not polarized by our beliefs, unable to listen to other points of view, but open to new ideas, and that's due to the opportunities we have received during Washington Week.

Before Washington Week, I was not the person I am today, and I have to thank every speaker, military mentor, staff member, and delegate for the life-changing experience I had. I know that USSYP will stay with me as long as I live, and so will the words of Senator Cory Gardner: "You don't need to act like you belong because you do belong. You belong in D.C."