

Laura Wagner, DE – 2016

When I first arrived at USSYP, I knew that I was in for the best week of my life. I was picked up senator-style from Union Station in a black SUV by two USSYP staff members, and that was the moment that I knew that the United States Senate Youth Program was going to be even more incredible than I had ever imagined. When I walked into the Mayflower and met the other delegates from all around the country, I knew I was in great company. Each person exhibited passion and talent, had an ability to express their beliefs articulately, and had great respect for civil debate. The United States Senate Youth Program was the best week of my life, because at every turn I was surrounded by people with the same dreams, goals, and ambitions.

The first full day of the program, we went to Mount Vernon and the Newseum, which capture the most important parts of American democracy: the peaceful transition of power, and free speech. I stood in George Washington's home and considered what a significant moment in history it was when he gave up his power not just once, but twice, in order to create a nation where power lay in the hands of the people. At the Newseum, the legacy of the first amendment and how it makes democracy possible is made tangible by every exhibit. Experiencing those two places in tandem increased my belief in the power of America and inspired me even more to go into public service to protect the legacy our Founding Fathers built. The United States Senate Youth Program affirmed my confidence in America and my faith in our nation's future, and every speaker affirmed to me that even though politics seems very polarized, everyone in Washington is fighting to make the United States the best it can be. Senator Cory Gardner spoke of our country's challenges, but he also spoke of the ways the government is trying to "move big rocks" and overcome those challenges. Secretary of Energy Dr. Ernest Moniz discussed the challenge of climate change and how America has to focus on clean energy in order for the United States to have a viable future, but the solutions can all be reached through compromise and hard work. Despite being in the heart of our nation's political arena, it didn't matter what party anyone belonged to because everyone in Washington is more than a member of a political party: they're Americans. All of the speakers during Washington Week showed me that even though there are difficulties facing our country, they can be overcome with a commitment on the part of future leaders like myself and my fellow delegates to work hard to make things better.

My absolute favorite moment of Washington Week was meeting President Obama at the White House. It was an incredible moment when he took my question and, upon hearing that I was from Delaware, joked that my question would be "Where's Joe Biden?" Hearing from the president firsthand that we should "know what we want to do, not what we want to be" has already changed my outlook on my future. Washington Week was transformative, and The Hearst Foundations have changed my life. I am forever indebted to them for the scholarship, incredible trip, and having the opportunity to meet with my hero, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Her words about her journey to the Supreme Court, the challenges of sexism that she faced, and the legacy of the Court was incredible, as it is my dream to someday sit on the Supreme Court. Justice Ginsburg's legacy is one that has inspired me to dream big and go after any challenge, and the chance to sit in the same room as her and hear her speak was an outstanding opportunity that I am extremely grateful for.

The United States of America is a beacon of democracy and hope in the world, and after attending Washington Week I am more confident than ever in its future. I believe strongly in the ability of our country, democracy, and my fellow delegates to achieve and extend on the ideals of freedom and justice for all that our Founding Fathers set out in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Talking foreign policy with John Kirby, climate change with Dr. Piers Sellers, and law with former Chief Judge Robert Henry are experiences that I am so grateful to have been able to share with 103 other amazing delegates due to the power of the words shared and the knowledge I gained as a result. Every moment of Washington Week was a blessing, and I am more knowledgeable, more passionate about politics, and a better American citizen thanks to the generosity of The Hearst Foundations.