

Ashlynn Hall, ID – 2016

I have always felt that I have a tremendous responsibility to make a difference in this world, but in my small farm town my efforts were often met by limited opportunities and results. From the moment that I received news that I would have the honor to represent Idaho in our capital, there was a new hope instilled in my heart that I could truly get on track to impact change on a greater scale. The United States Senate Youth Program not only ignited a renewed spark of patriotism, determination, and courage in my life, but provided me with the tools and knowledge to make the difference I have always aspired to.

As I review the pages and pages of notes I took during Washington Week, I am overwhelmed by the inspiration I feel. There are truly no words adequate to convey the lessons I learned and the great influence I felt from those I had the privilege to meet. I can honestly say I returned to my hometown a new person, driven by hope for a greater future and the conviction to make that hope a reality.

The greatest honor of my life thus far was to meet President Barack Obama surrounded by the most distinguished military mentors and fellow youth delegates. From the moment I saw the president walk down the long red carpet, I felt a rush of energy, and my desire to make a difference, and serve this great country grew with each word he spoke. I was so grateful for the hour he sacrificed to inspire us. The leader of the free world urged us as youth to know what we want to do, not what we want to be. He begged us to fight cynicism, and rise above the negativity that surrounds us today. President Obama assured us that there is no better time to be young and full of ambition than right now. Upon returning home, I was unable to convince many who don't agree with President Obama's political decisions that that afternoon in the White House changed my life. If only each and every citizen could experience what we did, we could do away with a lot of the lack of respect and partisanship that our country is experiencing. No matter one's political affiliation or opinion of the president, there aren't words to describe the inspiration he is to our great nation. I know that I speak for all of my fellow delegates when I say that I am still on cloud nine from being in the same room as such a powerful and motivational man.

There simply is not enough words in the English language or time in this world to truly convey the impact that Washington Week played on my life. To choose a favorite from the Newseum, Mount Vernon, and Arlington would be just as impossible as choosing between Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Senator Gardner, and John Kirby.

Before Washington Week, I was unsure what I wanted to do with my future. Although I have yet to set the details in stone, I now know with an undeniable conviction that I will spend my life giving back in every way I can. The United States Senate Youth Program opened my eyes to the great strengths and weaknesses our country holds, and like President Obama urged, I know what I want to do. I have no choice but to put all my might, mind, and strength to public service, for now I've seen the great difference that those in public service make each and every day.

I would like to thank The Hearst Foundations, USSYP staff, military mentors, and distinguished speakers for making Washington Week possible and providing me with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to witness our unique national government in action.