

Lexie Jamieson, ME – 2016

When asked to describe one of the most incredible experiences of my life, I am suddenly at a loss for words. I could go on and on, brag about meeting the president, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, or our state's senators. However, nothing will compare to that feeling of spending a week in our nation's capital, visiting the most important buildings in the United States, and being surrounded by the other 103 brilliant student delegates.

For most of my life, I have continuously told everyone "I hate politics." I've been raised in politics and grew up attending political functions, meeting local politicians, and even attending President Obama's first inauguration in 2009. The older I became, the more involved I became in political and social justice issues. Due to my involvement in my community, my friends, teachers, and coaches would always say "Lexie, you're going to be president someday." Even after winning the senior superlative of "Most likely to be president," I still was not convinced. In my mind, I still "hated" politics. However, the United States Senate Youth Program changed that for me.

Upon arriving in Washington, D.C. on March 5th, I had no idea what to expect. I didn't know that the next seven days would be some of the most incredible, challenging, intensive, and life-changing of my life. Being in D.C. opened my eyes to how you can be involved in politics and not be a politician. There are so many different aspects of public service, and you can still be involved in politics or work on Capitol Hill without being a politician, for example as a lobbyist on Capitol Hill or working in foreign affairs.

When asked, "What was the best part of the week?" it is certainly difficult to choose one. Obviously, meeting President Obama was unbelievable. After waiting in the East Room for what seemed like hours but was probably only thirty minutes, we saw President Obama's smiling face walk through the doors. As he walked down the long hallway, everyone in the room became silent, as we anticipated his arrival. I had seen President Obama before, at his first inauguration and shaking his hand when he was campaigning in Maine, but to be in that room and to know that he was there to personally address us, was an incredible feeling. President Obama gave us insight about our future careers and our place in this nation. He told us, "You live in a time that is healthier, wealthier, more educated, more tolerant, less violent, and more accepting of each other's differences than ever before. If you could choose any place in history to live without knowing what race or gender you would be, you would choose today." Generally in today's political climate, we are told that we are the worst generation, and that there is no chance or hope for the future. To hear our nation's supreme leader say these words, gave me a new hope for the future, and made me believe that our generation can change this nation and the world.

President Obama also said one phrase that I think will stick with me for the rest of my life. He said, "Don't focus on who you want to be; focus on what you want to do." A lot of people want to be in politics or run for office because they want the title, and that's all. I think it's something we all get really caught up in, and it's important to take a step back and remember why you wanted to do it in the first place. It's all about completing the work and serving others, not the title in front of your name.

The prestige of the program definitely spoke throughout the week. We traveled through the Supreme Court Building, the White House, the Capitol, and walked straight by signs that said "Authorized Personnel Only." It was like we were living high class for the entire week. In addition, wherever we went, there were USSYP alumni everywhere. Whether it was staffers in White House, state Senators, people who worked at NASA, or just someone at the National Symphony Orchestra saying hi, Washington, D.C. was filled with USSYP alumni, and I am so excited to say that I am now a part of that group.

Although the entire week as a whole was incredible, I have to say that the best part was bonding with and getting to know my fellow delegates, the military mentors, and the incredible USSYP staff. When meeting with President Obama, he addressed us and said "Congratulations, you are among 104 of the nation's best and brightest." It was so incredible to be around people that are so intelligent, so intellectual, so willing to engage in conversation and so interested in what's going on in the world. You certainly do not find that in your everyday life. Although we might not have all agreed or had the same viewpoints, each delegate was respectful when stating their own views or listening to others. The people at

Washington Week generally just wanted to learn more and hear other's points of view, and every conversation ended respectfully in a handshake. The friendships I made during Washington Week are ones that I know will last for a very long time.

Thank you to The Hearst Foundations for the incredible opportunity to be a part of the 54th annual United States Senate Youth Program. I am forever indebted for the amazing opportunities given to me, for 103 best friends from all over the nation, and for having an intense passion for public service and love for my country instilled in me. Every time we drove by or walked through Capitol Hill, I had a special feeling, like a little kid at Disney World. I cannot wait to be back in D.C. someday soon, as Senator Cory Gardner told us, "You don't need to act like you belong because you DO belong. You belong in D.C. You belong in your school. You belong in this nation, not as passive observers but as active participants who will solve these great challenges." This week will forever stand out as one of the best in my life, and I am excited to be able to cross paths with my USSYP family for the rest of my life.