

Richard Hwang, OH – 2016

With a mighty *whoosh* and a high-pitched screech, the plane engine of the United Airlines Embraer 175 roared to life, and it launched itself into the clouded skies of Ohio with a mighty thrust. On board, I had decided that airplanes were simultaneously impressive and dull, and lulled myself to sleep to the sound of turbulence.

After that wonderful nap, I considered eating the pair of Egg McMuffins hidden within the depths of my backpack. Suddenly, I realized that within the hour, I would be beginning my time at the United States Senate Youth Program; my stomach twisted and wringed itself with excitement, pushing thoughts of food far away.

Upon landing alongside my fellow Ohio delegate, we jog-strolled to baggage claim, where a well-organized group of military mentors steadily guided us to the first batch of delegates who had arrived in Washington, D.C. I didn't realize it at the time, but USSYP was an opportunity to meet 103 of the most talented and charming individuals in the great United States of America, a chance to form lifetime bonds, and an occasion to form a group of pals to go searching for the Canadian prime minister through the tight halls of The Mayflower Hotel.

I could go on about my fabulous friends, the refined air of The Mayflower Hotel, the amount of fun I had watching several members of the Hearst family (THE Hearsts) boogie on the dance floor alongside the delegates, and the final dinner of the week, where a good friend of mine dropped her phone into my food. However, to recount every minor event that I enjoyed would be a mammoth task too long to fully disclose. Instead, I will recount the biggest moments of Washington Week that I will stay in my glistening, luminous memories.

For one, meeting President Barack Obama was pretty cool.

Aside from having the opportunity to explore the White House and admire all of the presidential portraits, I had the luck to be able to spend an afternoon admiring the Pulitzer Prize-winning photographs at the Newseum. I had the wonderful opportunity to enjoy a beautiful performance by the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center following a scrumptious meal. I had the chance to see the one and only Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who was about ten times more adorable and awe-inspiring than what I had originally imagined.

Despite the slight simmer of jealousy for the New York delegates who got to meet the pint-sized justice, I would never trade my home state of Ohio for another one. Without this beautiful swing-state, I would never have experienced the golden moment of my USSYP experience: Senator Rob Portman dropping my certificate and drawing a line across the top of the piece of sacred parchment paper.

A charming and kind fellow, Senator Portman was undoubtedly morose and discomforted by what he had done, despite the thought racing through my head, "Now he'll remember me as the guy whose certificate he marked!" I still look at that line with a smile on my face and with hope in my heart that Senator Portman vaguely recalls my face when he drops a paper or signs a document.

Nevertheless, I certainly hope that my claim to fame isn't just having Senator Portman drop my certificate. Being at USSYP has changed my outlook on the United States and my role in our great nation's future. In the words of Senator Cory Gardner of Colorado, "We can all carry big rocks! The big rocks of democracy!" My ideas of personal efficacy and the power of the spoken word have been irrevocably altered into a frothing tongue trying to talk politics. Although it will take time, I have hopes that one day, my ideas can intertwine with the tree of American history, bonding and thickening into one of the many roots of the future.

Despite my hopes for potential political impact on economic and social issues, I am drawn to the words of President Obama: "Don't focus on what you want to be. Focus on what you want to do." At the

tender age of seventeen, I am steadily beginning to figure out what potential my future holds as I ponder these words. A shallower version of myself would've said something along the lines of, "Hey! I wanna be the next speaker of the House!" However, that is the exact fallacy that President Obama has reminded us not to fall for. To be honest, I really don't know what I want to be. However, I do know that I want to make a difference. In the equally wise words of NASA Administrator Charles Bolden, "You determine your own fate. You determine your own destiny."

It's hard to put into words the exact details about how USSYP has impacted the way I look at the world. After all, saying "instilling a desire to change the world" doesn't really mean anything. People say they want to change the world all the time, but most of the time, nothing comes to fruition. I guess the most accurate way of describing the influence of USSYP is that Washington Week truly moved me and motivated me. Rather than simply saying I am interested in changing the world, I now want to do *something*. I want to be active. I want to play a role shaping the future of United States of America. After all, Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz said to all 104 of us, "We are counting on you after all." After USSYP, I hope I won't let anyone down.