

Lee Adi, SC – 2017

“You can’t hire integrity ... It is the one thing no one can take from you but you can give up yourself.” I nodded, in complete awe over the person who spoke this eloquent truth. Seconds later, I seemed to return from my state of astonishment and landed in a gold-detailed, cushioned chair placed in the State Department’s state dining room, feet away from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Though my first thought was, unapologetically, “I can feel him breathe on me,” I soon began to comprehend how irrevocably lucky I was to be listening to Secretary Tillerson provide a few words about what it means to be a public servant.

My luck did not stop there. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of confusion the second I stepped foot off my plane from Charlotte to Washington, D.C. As I conversed with delegate after delegate near baggage claim, instantly bonding over how large our luggage was because we were unsure how much to pack, I realized that I would be spending a week amidst the brightest and most inspiring high school juniors and seniors from across the country. I questioned, “What did I do to deserve this?”

A facetious answer to the previous question would be “You somehow managed to score better than everyone else in your state on the seemingly impossible multiple choice test.” However, by the end of the week, I had a new answer. It is not necessarily about what I did. It is about what I can do for others. This is the epitome of public service: acknowledging that you have a powerful voice and capitalizing on it by using that voice to serve the will of those who may not have one. I found a purpose.

I came to learn that there is no such thing as an ideal public servant. One can serve the public like Surgeon General Vivek Murthy by educating the public about proper health or like Mr. Bob Schieffer who dedicated his life to providing society with independently gathered news.

I continued to sit in awe speaker after speaker, but there were a few that somehow managed to go beyond inspiring me. Ambassador Ron Dermer and Mr. Mark Shriver were both captivating and provided me with extensive insight about the state of Israel and early childhood development respectively. Of course listening to President Trump tell us we were very smart was not too bad either. As for events, this was perhaps one of the greatest experiences of the week. Chills ran down my spine as I realized I was in the presence of the leader of the free world. I had a similar feeling eating dinner next to the Constitution in the National Archives Rotunda.

In retrospect, the United States Senate Youth Program was a week of incredible speakers, breathtaking views, and gourmet food. However, what made the week unparalleled was the people I met. From the Military Mentors to the delegates, I will forever be touched by and attached to those who shared this life-changing experience with me. I was told before I got off that Charlotte flight that this week would be one for the books. I was skeptical initially, but now, reading my blue, embroidered journal, I realized they were right. I have my book to prove it.