

Starting this essay might have just been the most difficult thing I've done since leaving the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) and saying goodbye to all the beautiful people I met during my week-long stay in Washington. I find it hard to put the experience of a lifetime into a mere reflection essay. In many ways, this is not a reflection essay - I am not reflecting on an experience in my past, but instead reporting on a new state of mind. Every day I'm reminded of the lessons I learned at the USSYP program, and the constant struggle for positive change our country is going through.

I have a newfound sense of hope in the future of our country. Living as an outspoken, liberal, queer teenager in a deeply red state, I went into this program with a deep mistrust of government. I felt that Washington was so far removed from the concerns of the people - that special interests had polluted the institutions that had been held up for so long. But seeing, feeling, breathing in the atmosphere of Washington completely opened my eyes. Yes, partisanship has caused a gridlock like we have never seen before, and yes, the problems we face in this new century are exponentially larger than the ones our forefathers faced. But I saw up close the complex institutions of government being created for and run by equally complex citizens. Their motives, actions, and characters are not black and white, good or evil, as often portrayed by our media. As obvious as it may seem, government officials really are human beings. To have been given the opportunity to have been plucked from my high school and really see this truth for myself is something I will never forget. We idolize and villainize our political figures to the point of making them unrecognizable and flesh and bone. Shaking hands with my senators, hearing Bernie Sanders speak on the Senate Floor, having a luncheon with Amy Klobuchar - all of these experiences shattered my black and white vision of the people who make up our government. The people of D.C. are working tirelessly on new solutions that often don't receive credit or attention. The negativity, the gridlock, and the corruption - it can all be defeated.

But it was not only the humanization of our government that renewed my dream for a brighter tomorrow - it was shown to me in the 103 different dreams, experiences, and beliefs of my class of co-delegates. I learned so many fascinating and challenging things from equally unique and talented people. I discovered that completely different and deeply held personal beliefs could be reconciled through mutual respect and civil conversation. As Senator Tim Scott told us on Monday, our true differences are only "how people want to get to a common goal." While that common goal can become easily mired down in the heated political climate of today, especially online, I saw that real companionship could bridge even the widest of gaps. We were such a diverse group of kids from diverse backgrounds, creeds, races, and sexual orientations - but I have nothing but kind thoughts and wishes for every single one of them. I left knowing that all of my co-delegates are going to do amazing, challenging, and world-changing things, and meeting other people with the same fire inside only grew mine. As we continue to learn and grow, I know my generation, so brilliantly captured in my class of co-delegates, will start an inferno of change.

But what will I do to make tomorrow a better place? In my days since leaving D.C., I have struggled with feeling as though I don't do enough. But my fears have subsided into an expanding horizon of passion for public service. An hour after I returned to Birmingham from D.C., I attended the 2018 Alabama All-State Choir Concert. Extremely sleep deprived but happy to be attending, I saw public service in a form not once mentioned in my week in Washington, simply because it has little directly to do with government - music. Many of the pieces performed were covertly or overtly political, with messages of fighting oppression, the power of women, and the importance of love and communication. Having loved music my whole life, including politically-charged music, I had still never connected the potential for music making, sharing, and performing to be a form of public service. In Washington, Representative John Lewis told us, "Do what you can to help redeem our nation." Not everyone has to be an elected official to make a difference. Again, it seems obvious - but it really wasn't to me. Public service has taken on a new meaning for me, and I strive to do something for the community good every single day. The Librarian of Congress, Dr. Carla Hayden, told us "service comes in many forms." This may be one of the simplest messages that was conveyed to me during my time at USSYP, but it resonates with me clearly to this day. Now being aware of it, I see the potential for it in the things I love that I never felt were oriented for it - theatre, music, science, and more. It is liberating and absolutely terrifying to have so many avenues for public service. But at the same time, I know I have the wisdom of the speakers, the Military Mentors, and my co-delegates at my side to always keep me striving towards a better future for our nation. Wherever life ends up taking me, I know it won't just have been sheer luck. The wisdom I gained during this week will be my prized

possession as I navigate college life and beyond. I am forever grateful for the opportunity the Hearst Foundations and USSYP has given me.