

Annie Wang, CT – 2018

The day I learned I would be a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was a life-changing one. Life-changing is a word that certainly carries a large impact. But I can assure you that I do not use the term loosely. The experiences that I had during the seven days that I spent in the nation's capital can only be described as life-changing. The only feelings that I am now left with are an overwhelming sense of gratefulness and resounding hope. I am grateful for the 103 new friends that I made and the wonderful people throughout the week who gave me advice and gave me the chance to hear about the change that they are making in their own communities. I am hopeful for our nation's future and excited to see all the incredible things that my fellow delegates will accomplish in the future.

To be honest, I was very nervous before going to D.C. I was nervous that I would be inferior in knowledge or speaking ability to my fellow delegates. These were 103 of the most accomplished, ambitious, intelligent people that I knew I would ever meet. But as soon as I saw my Military Mentor at the airport with a wide smile holding a sign welcoming me, I was suddenly at ease.

For everyone, the week is a time of careful reflection and for open-minded understanding. We aren't there to compete or to push our own ideas upon others. Instead, it is a time to take in the sights and to get a little too comfortable eating three course meals and fancy desserts. It is a time to define your personal values and beliefs and to really hear and try to understand others' lives and experiences. As my fellow delegate from Delaware, Justin Chan said to me on various occasions, "We have two ears and only one mouth for a reason." A lot of times *actually* listening is one of the most valuable things that we can do and I tried to do a lot of this throughout the week.

The most memorable speaker of the week for me was Congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis. Lewis told us about his experiences growing up as a black boy in the South many years ago in a vastly different America. He talked about being beaten within an inch of his life, being arrested on multiple occasions, and enduring these many hardships to get to this point today. Streams of tears ran down my face as I heard him speak. The one feeling that I had as I heard him speak was unworthiness. Many of the life stories of my fellow delegates would be different without John Lewis. John Lewis is someone who spent his life fighting for justice and I'm still in pure awe and still can't believe that I had the honor to hear him speak.

Since I have returned to my own community, I have realized just how unique the United States Senate Youth Program truly is. It gives passionate 17 and 18 years olds from different states and socioeconomic backgrounds the chance to interact and hear from our most eminent leaders in American politics today. One thing that I felt as soon as I got there was that although each of us came from such different backgrounds, we were much more similar than I could have ever expected.

Although I have talked about some of the big, more defining moments, there are an infinite number of smaller moments that were equally important. Between tours and speakers, during meals and on the bus, I got to talk to a variety of incredible people and make lifelong friends. It was these conversations and moments that made my experience truly "life-changing". Lastly, I would like to once again say thank you to The Hearst Foundations, my fellow delegates, Military Mentors, and the various speakers for reminding me why I want to enter public service. This was a week that I will never forget and I am honored to remain a part of the USSYP and its legacy for the rest of my life.