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I first heard about USSYP one year ago. I was sitting in a plastic chair in Wiesbaden, Germany intently listening to the two delegates as they shared their experiences during something called "Washington Week." The program the delegates spoke of sounded interesting, but way out of my comfort zone. Living in Europe, I had minimal opportunity to participate in United States governmental proceedings. How was I supposed to compare with students in the States who had spent most of their lives involved in politics? I typed down the name of the program in my phone, but did not intend to apply. Little did I know, I would forever be grateful to John Casey and Emma Rook for sharing their experience that day.

In my junior year, I attended Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) Europe's Model U.S. Senate for the first time. It was my gateway into the intricate, fascinating world of politics. Prior to arriving, I hurriedly finished my bill on alternative green energy sources for the senator I was representing, Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota. I had no idea that in a little less than a year, I would be listening to that senator explain her experience in the Senate, shake her hand and have the honor of her picking me to ask the first question about her speech.

The next time I even thought about USSYP, was in the fall. I had decided to run for a student body position and a thought was beginning to form in the back of my head: maybe I should apply. What did I have to lose? I submitted an application that was in many ways more challenging than the applications I was sending to colleges and then waited. Something that struck me when I received my acceptance was that for the first time in my life, someone who had never even met me in real life believed in me. If they thought I deserved this scholarship and this incredible opportunity, then I had better start believing in myself more. And that is what I have tried to do ever since.

The Hearst Foundations, which kindly admitted me to the unique experience that USSYP provides, has forever changed how I see myself and the U.S. government. My leadership, public speaking, communication and listening skills, improved because I was less self-conscious and willing to take risks. The whole week was a series of unforgettable experiences. I wish more of America could have the experience of Washington Week because it allows citizens to hear members of their government speak their minds without censorship from the media.

Many Americans feel disconnected from the government because of the extremes we are exposed to on television and in the media. Living overseas for the majority of my teenage years, I have been both removed and directly affected by politics in the U.S. When a government shutdown occurs because of political partisanship, everyone in my life is directly affected and yet I live 5,465 miles away. This experience is unique, yet I still feel like many other teenagers: that I alone will have little impact on trying to get involved and make changes in how the government is run. It has been exciting to watch how my peers are starting to speak out and express to the government that there is a need for change. It was an exciting time to be in D.C. when teenagers all around the states were engaged in trying to get their voice heard by the government.

The question I have been asked the most this week after I returned from D.C. is what was your favorite part? I do not have a simple answer. The whole week was life-changing and completely unique. As a group, the other 103 student delegates and I were forever changed by our time in D.C. One of my favorite parts of the week was meeting my peers. We all came from different backgrounds, economic situations, races and religions. I found each of them inspiring, and as leaders in their communities, they have already made a difference through public service. One topic touched upon by many speakers during Washington Week, and a common theme discussed and exacerbated through media, was the increasing polarization in politics. Despite this influential trend, our group of delegates were able to listen to each other, discuss and accept widely diverse opinions without breeding animosity or establishing sides.

A word that I believe defines the week is civility. Just listening to my fellow delegates and meeting various government officials during the week humanized them and made me feel that these positions are within my reach. Even though we came from very different places, we managed to overcome our differences and listen to each other. That is the most important message: to listen and learn from those around you even if you may disagree with them. The more that you know about someone, the more you can relate and understand why they have their political position. Personal contact with people from vastly different backgrounds, which my USSYP experience provided, showed me the importance of

stepping back from the increasingly negative political atmosphere of the internet and media and instead getting to know the person behind the political position or government official. We need to work together in communities to make change because politicians that get out in their communities and give time to inspiring young people are making a difference. The Hearst Foundations scholarship and the expertise they provided to us at USSYP instilled in all of us attending the need for public service.