

Sibani Ram, IA - 2018

Humanities are often viewed as very challenging fields, ones that may not pave the way to multitude of career tracks as the realms of mathematics and science. Before I attended the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), there were moments when I succumbed to this assertion. I'd always loved the stories of history – how the United States dove deep into democracy and shook the daunting pillars of absolutism. I'd always loved the emotional punch of politics. But, in the back of mind, I felt my connection to humanities was confined to the high school experience. While government was built to be a symbol of public service, it was rapidly veering from that path. USSYP shattered this mindset. Humanities are what make us human. Senate Parliamentarian, Elizabeth Macdonough said it best, “Your government is a living, breathing creature.”

Throughout the online research and application process, it immediately became clear that USSYP opened doors, but in all honesty, the program opened worlds. It compelled me stretch my power of perception. Here, I heard magnetic rhetoric unlike any where else. Here, I saw humble, esteemed public servants pouring their souls into preserving the democracy birthed by our framers. From FEMA executive Brian Kamoie, who encouraged us “to commit now to learning how to learn” to Circuit Court Judge Henry, who cautioned against careless, unplanned resistance, USSYP showed me that humanity is still a driving force in a governmental career. I came to learn quite early that politics was not an impossible path, but a changing one – one molded by crossover and preserved by the democratic process.

There was one speech from USSYP that rendered me speechless – the U.S. Senate Sergeant at Arms, Mr. Frank Larkin. Mr. Larkin's story exemplified simple, yet powerful love in the seemingly grand scheme of politics. As he spoke of the connection between his resignation from the Senate post to pursue Veteran's Affairs and his son's death from PTSD, I could feel the room vibrate with emotion. Here was a former Navy Seal, who'd worked diligently to his rise in Washington, ready to give up what he'd tirelessly worked for. Here was a loving father, trudging through tough times, but determined that other aspiring young soldiers wouldn't face his son's fate. Here was a public servant following his heart amidst a heated environment. For the rest of my day, my mind circled back to his journey. Mr. Larkin's response reminded me that no sacrifice is too big – that it's always vital to do what is right rather than what is typical.

As the week went on, I felt Mr. Larkin's message reverberate in several following speaker messages, but most of all I saw it reflect in the stories and experiences of my delegates. In a pool of introverts, extroverts, and in-betweens, we were united in our unrestrained love for the power of humanities and democracy. I sensed this passion in the initial discussions on orientation day. I saw it come alive in the genuine, eloquent appreciation remarks. I felt it resonate across the room in every group discussion, speaker question session, and personal interaction. Coming into USSYP, I knew I was going to meet ambitious overachievers, but I instead met something far more inspiring: devoted believers who turned challenges into opportunities. Words cannot express my gratitude to the Hearst Foundations and United States Senate for their tireless efforts in sponsoring this endeavor. Thank you for reminding me of the strength and conviction in humanities. Thank you for the inspiration of a lifetime. Every moment was a gift.