

Claire Harmon, KY – 2018

Being from a small town in Kentucky, I've always felt very removed from my federal government. Geographically, I'm not close to my state's or our nation's capitals and had never been to Washington, D.C., so everything I'd learned about in my history and government classes was hypothetical. Every time we discussed *Brown v. Board of Education*, the caning of Charles Sumner on the Senate floor, or Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, I had to use what visuals I could find on the internet and then fill in the gaps with my imagination.

Attending the United States Senate Youth Program shifted my perspective immediately. Simply walking into The Mayflower Hotel for the first time was a new and overwhelming experience and every moment that followed came with even more emotion and excitement.

On the first full day of the program, we traveled to Mount Vernon. During the bus ride, I was trying to orient myself and make my brain cope with the fact that I was really there, but at one point I looked out the window and found myself staring at the White House. Like, the *real White House*. I almost fainted right there.

Suddenly, the hypothetical places we had discussed in class weren't so hypothetical anymore. Political figures I'd been following for years weren't just names in the headlines; they were standing right in front of me or eating lunch at the table next to me. Every minute was surreal and I found myself trying to remember every single detail so I would never forget how I felt.

However, while every speaker we met and every place we visited was impactful and meaningful, nothing will ever compare to meeting my personal hero: Dr. Carla Hayden, Librarian of Congress.

As all of the delegates were arriving, we tried to get to know each other as quickly as possible and one of the main questions we asked was, "What speaker are you most excited about?" A lot of people mentioned Justice Neil Gorsuch or Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, but I always answered with a *very* enthusiastic "CARLA HAYDEN!" to which many people responded, "Who?"

Unfortunately, most of my fellow delegates did not share my apparently unique passion for libraries and Dr. Hayden in particular, but they were all very supportive and seemed to agree - after I educated them on her extraordinary background and general awesomeness - that the opportunity to hear her speak was a rare and incredible one.

When the time came to hear Dr. Hayden speak, I wasn't just nervous. I was sweaty palms, body shaking, about to throw up nervous. When she entered the room, I immediately burst into tears and had to take a few moments to gather myself and the entire time she spoke, I was enraptured. Here she was, the woman I had read so much about and admired from a distance for so long, right in front of me. After her speech, she agreed to do a short Q&A session and my hand shot up so fast I honestly thought I dislocated my shoulder.

I kept my hand up as high as I possibly could and when she agreed to take one final question, I almost lost hope. But then a microphone was shoved in my hand and Carla Hayden was looking at me! We were making eye contact!

After an awkward pause, I began to explain how much public libraries had done for me and my small town and that her career was an inspiration to me and so many others. Unfortunately, though, I started to cry *again*. I was actually sobbing in front of the Librarian of Congress. Whoops.

Carla Hayden, being the queen that she is, took my emotional outburst in stride and came off the stage at the end of her speech and met me. She gave me her business card, we took a picture together, AND SHE HUGGED ME.

A lot of amazing, wonderful, magical things happened at the Senate Youth Program, but nothing will ever compare to that short moment when I got to meet the person I had looked up to for so long.

This moment was one of the hundreds of emotionally charged, life-altering experiences I shared with my fellow delegates, and through these experiences, we forged an astonishingly strong bond. It was as though I suddenly had 103 new best friends from all over the country who all cared about the same things I did.

While I could never encapsulate every moment, every speaker, every feeling into a short essay, I can say that the United States Senate Youth Program has permanently changed my life. It has given me confidence,

strength, knowledge, and so much more. The fact that this opportunity even exists - let alone the fact that *I got in* - seems too good to be true and I can never repay the Hearst Foundations and my fellow delegates for everything they have done for me.