

Taylor Hvidsten, MN -- 2018

I had no idea what to expect when I arrived in Washington, D.C. for the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). I knew very little about the program, and most of what I had heard was from the other 2018 delegates in our lively group message prior to Washington Week. My school had never sent a delegate and wasn't familiar with the program, so my acceptance came with a big question mark (and quite a few exclamation points).

Little did I know that this program would be like no other. When I walked into the Minneapolis airport early Saturday morning, I was met by seven or eight other delegates waiting to get to Washington. It was unusual to feel so instantly connected to a group of people I had only known by a small circle profile picture on GroupMe. More than a month after that initial meeting in the airport, I can confirm that my instincts were right. The friends I made over the course of the entire USSYP process are not only incredibly kind and supportive, but also the people who I want to see lead our nation.

During Washington Week we had the incredible opportunity to hear from a wide variety of people who were passionate about making a better America, whether it's through the Senate, the media, or other government positions. I most vividly remember the opportunity to meet with my senator and role model, Senator Amy Klobuchar.

I learned that I would introduce her on the Monday of the program, and I was stressed about it until Thursday — the day we actually met her! I had been dealing with a sore throat and kept losing my voice, but when it was time to present my speech it felt like the heavens opened for me and my voice was back to normal. (I found out shortly after I had returned from Washington Week that I had strep throat the entire week. Yikes!) My fellow delegates, my Military Mentor (Major Parrish), and the USSYP staff were so supportive while I was preparing my speech and after I gave it. I can't imagine a better environment to be in while doing something so special to me.

After I spoke, Senator Klobuchar told us stories about almost eating a bowl of salad dressing and knocking over her fellow senators while on her way to help her daughter pick out a bathing suit. It was the quirky moments, like Senator Klobuchar's stories, that really made this program special. Moments like the surprisingly large number of debates we had regarding regional foods (nobody eats Miracle Whip with ham, Nicole), or the extremely bold questions a few delegates asked to speakers like Supreme Court Justice Gorsuch, provided us with unique access most people will never experience.

I wasn't able to ask as many questions as I would have liked during the week, but I was able to observe and take in different perspectives brought forth by the diverse group of students at USSYP. Coming from a small, rural town in Minnesota, diversity isn't exactly something my area is known for. I remember one conversation I heard regarding the experience of being a minority in the United States and how we can make programs like USSYP more accessible to a wider audience. It was incredibly eye opening to hear from such passionate people who have different life experiences than me.

This shared experience has united all 104 of us as civically engaged youth, and I am so thankful for the new network of incredible people that I can now call my friends. These students have already begun to change their communities, and I cannot wait to see what they will do for our nation.