

Abigail Roston, MT -- 2018

In my initial application process to the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), I told the story of young Kalief Browder; a 16-year-old kid who was held in the notorious Rikers Island jail for over three years with no trial, stripped of justice. After three years of postponed dates of trial, Kalief was finally released. Yet, shortly after his return back into society, Kalief committed suicide. Kalief is one story of the many across the country who are wrongfully incarcerated and fail to regain their place in society after years lost to an unjust system.

I decided that after reading his story, I could not stand back as an organization designed to deliver justice continually fails the very people it is supposed to be serving. I was interested in a program that gave me the tools not only to understand my system of justice, but question its very nature and ability to function. I was interested in a program that encouraged me to go outside the conventional topics of a government class, diving deeper into our American democracy. I was interested in a program that allowed me to honor the legacy of Kalief Browder.

Traveling to Washington, D.C., meeting government officials ranging from a circuit court judge, to senators, to a Supreme Court justice, frankly, my expectations were exceeded. Most notable was meeting Congressman John Lewis. It would be hard to find an American more committed to achieving justice for all than Representative Lewis. I will never forget scribbling down every word he uttered, tearing up at just the thought that I was in the same room as a civil rights icon. I kept wondering the questions Kalief would have asked Representative Lewis. So I kept scribbling, hoping that the words I heard him say would carry me through life in pursuit of justice. I will never forget the deep breath and pause he took before saying to a room full of excited, motivated, and emotional teenagers that one must "be fearless in the fight that sets your heart on fire."

I have found my fight and I have found my fire. The United States Senate Youth Program allowed me to define my flame, pursuing a legal career centering around wrongful incarceration and the criminal justice system. From this experience, I know that my fight can and will one day be successful. I understand that solving the enormous problems within the United States criminal justice system will not be accomplishable in the near future. However, through USSYP, I have been empowered to make the unattainable more within reach. My eyes have been opened to the persistence, dedication, and unrelenting optimism of the public officials who have come before me. It is my full intention to keep that flame alive and burning. Although I could not do it for Kalief, the fight must go on for there are more to serve. Like that of Congressman Lewis, and the many other public servants we met, I hope that my career is defined by standing up for people who have been silenced, delivering justice in the darkest parts of society.

Standing at the foot of the United States Capital, I found myself inspired and driven by the words of the Pledge of Allegiance, "...with liberty and justice for all". That is what all American citizens pledge to live by every day. Looking around at my fellow delegates, I know that we would continually strive to embody these core values of American society in the face of whatever adversity we shall be met with. I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you for the United States Senate Youth Program for empowering me to leave my mark on American society, upholding liberty and justice for *all citizens*.