

Ravi Patel, OK – 2018

A distasteful hyperborean sensation steadily trickled up my spine. A blur of mixed emotions cascaded across my mind and over my face as uncertainty occupied my thoughts. The sun beat down fervently through the windows on my flight to the centrifugal force of freedom, democracy, and patriotism. Despite the vigorous winds tampering with the stability of our plane, the august ambiguity that surrounded the program and its future implications upon my life were much more frightening. Yet, little did I know, while stepping off our United Airlines flight, that I was about to enter a chasm and abyss of knowledge, intellect, activism, creative ingenuity, and lifelong friendships. I still remember an ecstatic Captain Iida greeting all of us delegates at Dulles, with such invigorating energy that any concept of uncertainty fled within seconds of arrival. Moments into the United States Senate Youth Program, I knew I was home.

As the son of two immigrants from a small town in Oklahoma, I always felt distant and disengaged with the political system in the United States. This concept of “not belonging”, consistently tugged at my spirit and ambitions for a hopeful future in doing what I admired most: public service. The United States Senate Youth Program completely changed my perspective on my ability to engage with what I am avidly passionate about but also solidified the momentous capability the youth of this nation have to create a luminous future. The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was thoroughly and intrinsically the most empowering week of my life. I and many other delegates came out of Washington Week with encouragement and guidance on how to impact our communities, states, and nation from the most notable dignitaries and the keenest colleagues. Meeting numerous dignitaries, ranging from the president of the United States, Supreme Court Associate Justice Neil Gorsuch, Senator Lankford, Marty Baron, Representative John Lewis and Carla Hayden were exhilarating and capacitating experiences I will never dare to forget. These individuals in positions of privilege are capable of making tectonic shifts in our nation's progression, and it is not every day that a teenager has the ability to question their heroes, role models, and inspirations.

Despite being deeply inspired by our speakers, my fellow delegates had the greatest impact upon me. I can't even begin to articulate how much these individuals mean to me. My fellow delegates will forever continue to remain the beacon of light and the inspiration I look towards for encouragement. From the late-night shenanigans on the mezzanine to sharing stories of our backgrounds and experiences, I will forever embrace and cherish these memories. Margaret Mead once prophetically said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” The delegates I met during the United States Senate Youth Program are a testament to those very words. The unimaginable imprint the delegates of USSYP left on me provides me with an abundance of confidence for our future.

What I imagined would be an extensively elongated and dreadful week, went by swiftly. I still remember boarding that first United flight to Dulles, like it was yesterday. Through disagreement and discussion, through tears of joy and desolation, USSYP formed into something more than what it was portrayed to be. USSYP became a family. Our passion to understand each other and confabulate topics of diverse opinion through civility transcended all political disagreements. But most importantly, our desire to serve our country through public service permeated all boundaries of divergence. I have never been a part of something so impactful, empowering, and invigorating. I don't think I ever will be. My time in USSYP may have elapsed, but I will forever embrace this program and these memories.