

Enrique Flores, OR -- 2018

I remember reading these delegate essays, as I researched the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). After reading a couple of them, I became convinced that I wanted to be a part of this program more than anything. These essays were what pushed me to apply and I hope they do the same for those of you who read mine... if anyone ever does. Before I delve into how amazing and life-changing this trip was, I want to encourage anyone, even if you think you aren't qualified, to apply. I never thought I would be selected to represent Oregon. I genuinely believed that I had no chance of being selected and that there were more qualified people to be chosen, but now I am here writing a reflection essay on the best week of my life.

As cliché as it sounds, I have no idea where to begin. There were so many amazing things that I got to experience that my essay, no matter how much time I spend on it, will ever do it justice. To begin with, I should mention the things that everyone already knows: we got to meet the president of the United States, a Supreme Court justice, Senator Bernie Sanders, the Secretary of the Treasury, an ambassador from Canada, and so many other people that I still cannot believe I met. When I look at the news now, I no longer see a person who somehow happens to be important, but instead someone who I met in person and listened to speak. Those opportunities when I got to listen to some of the most powerful officials in the United States, or even the world, were when I learned the most. I learned that those people we all see on television are nothing more than people who saw a problem and wanted to find a solution to it. When Senator Amy Klobuchar told us her story of how she began her career in public service, she told us how it all stemmed from a simple city problem she wanted to fix. These encounters taught me that I am capable of being a senator one day. Although this was one many lessons I learned, I want to illustrate how in each speech we heard - and there were lots of them - I learned something. I hope if you are selected for the program that you write down as much as you can, but at the same time try and balance it with being present in the moment when you are listening.

Aside from all the phenomenal speakers we met, the other delegates in the program are what made the program special. Being given the opportunity to interact with someone from every state was something I had never experienced. By being able to speak to students, now friends, from every state, I was able to listen to a variety of different beliefs, stemming from "what is your favorite color?" to "should abortion be legal?" Arguments I had never heard before helped me question and analyze my own beliefs so that I could further understand why I was in agreement or disagreement with certain policies. I began to question whether or not my beliefs were my own or a product of my environment. I was able to learn about why people believed in certain things, and instead of people attacking others for their beliefs, we all listened and tried to become more informed citizens. And that is what makes this program so special: everyone is open-minded and willing to learn. We all wanted to absorb as much knowledge as possible from the speakers, but more importantly from each other. Instead of fighting over who was right, we held "civil" debates in the Mayflower Grand Ballroom.

Although it was eye-opening to see all these different views and perspectives, coming from a state that has a homogeneous ideology, I also enjoyed other things about my fellow delegates. For example, and I stole this from a delegate essay from last year, but it still holds true, one of the coolest things I can now say is that "I know someone from every state." I was on a flight this past weekend, and I thought about the two delegates who lived in the state I was flying over. No longer did I think to myself, "I am flying over Nebraska that's cool" but instead I thought about how this where "Nicole and Bouthaina live, and I wonder how they are doing?" I now always have a friend wherever I go, and I think that is pretty cool. I know that if I am ever in Washington, I can call "Ahmed or Imani" and ask them for a tour. Additionally, whenever I fly anywhere or travel, I always make sure to contact whoever is in that state to see if we can have a "USSYP Reunion" and post it to our group chat.

I also cannot forget to mention how inspiring the Military Mentors were. Every step of the way throughout Washington Week, they were there to help guide us and give us advice about future career paths. I learned about the different opportunities available in the military and also about the lives of our mentors. They were so kind and willing to help. Additionally, when we sat with them at dinner, it was interesting to listen to them speak about their lives and how they viewed public service.

Overall, this program exceeded all of my expectations. Before I left my house to the airport, I knew that this week was going to be amazing. I understood that this was the "premiere youth in government experience," and that I was beyond lucky to be able to attend. I imagined standing and sitting next to some of the most powerful people in the world, and those dreams came true. I will never forget meeting and shaking hands with Senator Bernie Sanders or Congressman John Lewis. I will never forget the conversations we had at every meal that spanned every topic imaginable. I won't forget speaking with

my roommate until late at night, knowing that we would have to get up early in the morning. Those memories will forever be ingrained in my memory and I hope to never forget them. This experience was life-changing, inspirational, and eye-opening. Although some say that one week cannot be that transformative, I would have to disagree. This week was more than I thought was possible and I am the luckiest person in the world to have been able to experience it. I hope to one day come back for the alumni day and retrieve a pen that I lost this year, but until then I hope this reflection can act as my souvenir until I am able to return. No words will ever be able to describe how phenomenal this program was, but at least I tried.

P.S. Here are some tips to remember if chosen: Get as many photos taken of you by Jakub; he is amazing! Learn and have fun over getting sleep. Eat as much of the first-class food as humanly possible; you will miss it once you come home and realize that you will no longer be eating three-course meals. Lastly, have the most fun you can and forget about doing homework; this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience and no math, science, or history assignment is worth missing any moment of this week and living it to the fullest.