

2018 United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) Reflection Essay

I enjoy writing, and like most high school students I am tasked with writing a great many essays. However, nothing is quite like this one, as I do not even know how to begin. People ask me about my time at Washington Week and with the Senate Youth Program all the time, but I find it so difficult to adequately convey all my feelings and all of my awe-inspiring experiences. How do you use words to describe something for which words cannot possibly do justice? How do you explain the truly inexplicable? I legitimately cannot put this unfathomable experience into words, but I will try because the U.S. Senate Youth Program is indeed a repeating story of the seemingly impossible made possible.

My USSYP story starts in my high school guidance office, where the secretary asked me if I would be interested in being the first ever U.S. Senate Youth Program nominee from Lake-Lehman High School. She knew my answer already, and watched my face light up in excitement as she told me more and more about the phenomenal program we had just discovered. I acquired the mandated recommendations and signatures, filled out the application and gathered all the materials I had to submit, and then proceeded to mail them in. I had done this thinking, "This will never ever happen, but I'm honored to be chosen to represent my school and I am so pleased to just be associated with this program, to merely throw my hat in the ring and then at least have a chance." My philosophy was not one of certain victory or pre-ordained success, rather it was one of subdued hope. A few weeks later, I received an email and phone call notifying me that I would be going to Harrisburg, PA as one of ten semifinalists for a test and interview, and I was astonished to have received that recognition. I had fully accepted that I would proceed no further than that. Weeks later, I would be surprised once again to learn that by a real miracle, my doubt was proven wrong and I was chosen as one of two students to represent Pennsylvania in the U.S. Senate Youth Program.

Opening and starting to read my copious notes from Washington Week immediately brought tears to my eyes. My memory became refreshed to all the wonderful and inspiring delegates I met and bonded with, whose signatures and positive messages litter the pages of my book. The stories we heard, advice we were given, and insight that we observed from all of the speakers was truly life-changing and developed within me a deep passion and dedication to public service, in any capacity. I was absolutely floored when I found myself standing in the same Supreme Court chamber where cases like *Brown v. Board*, *Citizens' United v. FEC* and every other Supreme Court case since 1935 was argued and decided. The magnitude of being in this room was truly one of the most impactful moments of my entire life, and it was brought to me courtesy of the United States Senate Youth Program. To top it off, Associate Justice Neil Gorsuch came and spoke to us, taking our questions and sharing his viewpoints for hours. That moment was when I first realized how prestigious this program was, and how down-to-earth many of our national leaders really are.

The meals made my mouth water, and hearing our iconic host, Mr. Steve Cox, say "Dinner is served" before digging in to a delectable three course feast is something I deeply miss. Listening to and absorbing advice on leadership from Senator Angus King, refreshing humor from Senator Tim Scott, and enlightening policy stances from Senator Amy Klobuchar was insane and I still cannot quite comprehend that Washington Week really happened to me. Sharing a room, hearing a speech, and sitting five feet away from civil rights icon Congressman John Lewis was actually unbelievable, even though I did not get a handshake from him following his speech like some other delegates did. Later that day, in the magical spirit of USSYP, I was using the restroom at the Russell Senate Office Building prior to the signature Senate Reception. I inevitably got lost along the way and the journey to the restroom took me much longer than I had anticipated. I was washing my hands at the sink when I looked up in the mirror and saw, washing his hands next to me, the legendary John Lewis himself. I was able to speak and shake hands with him, interact with my senator, Bob Casey (who had read my biography and even knew what school I went to and what extracurriculars I was involved in), and dine with President Bill Clinton's former chief of staff who agreed to pass my greetings on to President Clinton himself. All of that happened in one day, a day that was one of the greatest of my life. Such joy was consistent throughout Washington Week, with experience after experience blowing my mind and growing my passion for service, politics, and leadership.

For who I am today, in part, I have to thank the United States Senate Youth Program. It forever changed who I will be, in a meaningfully positive way. I can say, without a shadow of a doubt, that I have met amazing people and have become a better person due to the U.S. Senate Youth Program. It has been the honor of my lifetime to participate in such an inspiring and insightful program, with so many awesome speakers, events, and fellow delegates which I will take with me in my heart for the rest of my life.

So, while I cannot possibly put this whole experience into words, I have made an honest attempt to touch on some of the most unforgettable memories from the week and the program. I discussed how I was selected and my journey, and some of what I witnessed and learned during the week. So much of the week, however, I could not possibly formulate into words, sentences, and paragraphs. There are so many feelings, emotions, and experiences that I could not possibly convey, and I encourage everyone who can to get involved in this life-changing program and experience, for themselves, the true magic and unfathomability that composes the United States Senate Youth Program.