

Sophie Carter, RI -- 2018

My first thought as I stepped off the plane in Washington Dulles Airport was, "I don't think I've ever been this far south before!" Coming from the smallest state, the one where every car ride over fifteen minutes long is a road trip deserving of a stop at Dunkin Donuts, I rarely ventured beyond my usual 20-mile radius. I was thrilled for the opportunity to speak with delegates from across the United States.

The United States Senate Youth Program impacted me in countless ways, but I can say with certainty that the aspect of the program that fundamentally changed me were the interactions I experienced with my fellow delegates. I quickly realized that every person I met possessed differing perspectives on life and politics. One of my favorite memories from Washington Week was sitting in the Grand Ballroom in my pajamas one night, listening to policy debates between left and right-leaning delegates. I was struck by the diversity in opinion among our group of 104, but also by the respect and decorum that was shown during discourse. My late-night conversations with my roommate and members of my mentor group were eye opening - apparently, most of America calls bubblers "water fountains!" By interacting with other passionate students from across the country, I can now safely say that I have at least two friends in every state.

Attempting to list the unforgettable moments of the USSYP Washington Week is a near-impossible feat, because every second of every day is filled with memories that still leave me speechless when I try to process them. Sitting in the chamber where *Brown v Board of Education* and *Roe v Wade* were decided, eating dinner a few feet from the United States Constitution, standing to recognize civil rights hero John Lewis, and having conversations with senators I have only ever seen on TV are all things the Hearst Foundations has given us the opportunity to experience.

I feel humbled to have learned powerful lessons about American government directly from the people who lead it. I learned from Senate Historian Betty Koed that every story has another side. Representative John Lewis taught us to fight hate and injustice with peaceful resistance and to never give in. Justice Neil Gorsuch emphasized the importance of disagreeing with others without being disagreeable. I realized through spending time with the seventeen Military Mentors who were by our sides throughout the week the importance of public service. Most of all, I learned from my fellow delegates that not every place in America is just like little Rhode Island - I learned that a world exists outside of my sheltered little state.