

Bayan Galal, CT – 2019

The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) is an experience that truly can't be put into words. One can describe it as thought-provoking, challenging, and inspiring, but none of these words truly do the program justice. USSYP provided 104 students who are leaders and activists in their communities to head to Washington, D.C. and experience the United States government in action. At the same time, we got to interact with our fellow delegates who challenged and improved our thought processes as we debated and discussed a broad range of political issues.

The program constituted visiting historical landmarks, as well as meeting with many of the nation's highest leaders. Visiting historical landmarks instilled in my fellow delegates and I an incomparable sense of American pride. Going to the National Archives and eating next to the Constitution showed us the ever-lasting influence of our founding documents; visiting Martin Luther King Jr.'s monument instilled in us an appreciation for those who fought to better the lives of others; entering the Supreme Court emphasized the importance of justice and fairness as principles of these nation. In each and every building, museum, or monument we visited, we learned more about our country and more about ourselves. We better understood our roots while simultaneously providing ourselves with a better platform to improve the future.

In addition to the places we visited, we met and listened to insightful leaders and individuals who had a lot to share about their experiences in public service. What fascinated me most was that each person had a different story about how and why they got involved in public service, yet the similarity they shared was their dedication to improving this nation and the situation of everyone in it. Our very first speaker was Jack Warren, a Revolutionary War historian and the executive director of the Society of Cincinnati. He explained that the American Revolution created independence, a republic, national identity, and articulate ideals. But what resonated most with me was his argument that "it is our job to fulfill the ideals of the American Revolution." The American Revolution and every moment since then has been a step towards equality and independence, and just because those ideals have not yet been completely fulfilled, it does not mean we should lose hope. Rather, we should work towards continuous improvement, because ultimately, "the fate of the republic lies in [our] hands." Listening to these speakers and learning more about their experiences taught me that public service is an area in which real leadership matters and real change can happen.

Even more important than the influence of our speakers was the influence of my fellow delegates. Never have I had the opportunity to interact with such a large group of insightful peers. No matter everyone's political views, we had meaningful discussions. We listened to opinions different than our own. We respected what everyone had to say. By hearing varying opinions from each of the delegates, we found that in order to push boundaries and consider broader possibilities, we need a wider range of opinions and thoughts. Ideas from people with backgrounds different than ours can teach us to think about issues in new ways and provide us with new inspiration and knowledge. Debate and disagreement are not the end of teamwork, but the beginning of it. This key piece of insight has guided my approach to politics since USSYP. In addition to bonding over politics, my fellow delegates and I had the opportunity to simply share life experiences, joke around, and chat in the mezzanine as we got to know each other better. At the start of USSYP, I walked into a ballroom full of 103 strangers and at the end, I walked out of it with 103 new best friends. I am unbelievably grateful to now have a network of friends all across the nation.

In the end, to say that USSYP changed my life would be an understatement. It's changed the way I think about approaching politics and public service. It's given me friends and mentors all across the country. I am incredibly grateful to the all of the individuals involved in planning the United States Senate Youth Program, as well as the contributions of the Hearst Foundations. They have gifted me with funds to continue my education, and more importantly, with an experience that I undoubtedly call the best week of my life.

Until next time, Washington, D.C.