

Malavika Kannan, FL – 2019

For some people, public service is a passion you develop: maybe after taking an AP government class, or visiting the Capitol during a class trip. Personally, I didn't have that luxury — I became a political organizer out of necessity after witnessing the intersections of inequality and violence at my own high school, where over 60% of us are students of color, where we've lost multiple people to shootings, drug-related violence, and incarceration. That's what inspired me to dive head-first into politics, whether I was leading protests and voter registration at school, volunteering for gun-sense nonprofits, or interning on a Congressional campaign. These were my first experiences participating in democracy — organic, diverse, chaotic democracy — and it was life-changing. I learned that I love America the most when I'm trying to improve it.

And that's what made the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) such a life-changing experience for me: being surrounded by people who show their patriotism by protesting, participating in, and perfecting their democracy. People who realize that America isn't shaped by people who sit complicit, fearful of change: it's shaped by Supreme Court justices who choose to legalize gay marriage; FEMA directors who rally up the nation's resources in times of disaster; State Department employees who work behind the scenes to house refugees in the Mediterranean; Senate parliamentarians who make unpopular decisions about Byrd Bath in order to uphold the constitution; high school students from across the country who convene for one life-changing week in D.C., preparing for the day that the country becomes ours to improve.

It's been a month since USSYP, and I still can't stop thinking about the indelible impression it's left on my life: as a student, activist, future leader. As a passionate government nerd, it was an unbelievable experience to get to ask questions about the Supreme Court to none other than Chief Justice John Roberts himself. I remember asking him about the role of the Supreme Court in promoting civil rights: did he believe that the justices had a duty to distinguish between morality and legality in order to continue pushing the social needle forward? (He said no, by the way: his duty was strictly to interpret and honor the Constitution.) Whether I was meeting influential leaders, visiting historic sites, or simply just walking down the streets of D.C., I felt something deep, rich, and impossible to define. It felt like being part of a heritage, or watching the formation of a legacy. I could feel the history living and breathing around me, reminding me of the powerful people that stood in D.C. before me, filling me with hope that I could make a positive difference, too.

And, of course, I'll never forget the moment that I stood next to the president himself in the White House, shook his hand, professed my support for Kamala Harris, and was subsequently advised to "have a nice life." It wasn't easy to meet the president, particularly since I'd spent my entire high school career working on the opposite side of the political spectrum. But the opportunity to shake his hand is an honor that I'm incredibly grateful for — not just because it's an unbelievable anecdote that I can tell my grandchildren, or because the resulting picture is so iconic: rather, it's because I'm forever grateful and awe-struck to live in a political system where an eighteen-year-old girl can look into the president's eyes, speak her mind, and have him listen, citizen-to-citizen.

Ultimately, I'm invested in using my USSYP experience to start conversations between people of different experiences, to create platforms for underrepresented people to get involved in politics, and to dedicate myself to public service. More than ever, our country needs socially-conscious leaders who listen to diverse voices, use our words as a tool for empowerment, and base our decisions on awareness and compassion. And certainly, there's this mindset among some young people that it's not cool to care about politics, and if you do, you're this crazy feminist or raging social justice warrior. (I am admittedly both.) Still, if we don't vote, we're effectively giving up our voices and our ability to control what happens to our futures. There's this quote from *House of Cards* that I think really summarizes the situation: "If you're not at the table, you're probably on the menu." I think it's high time that we made ourselves a seat at the table by showing up at the polls. We can't afford to play games with our democracy. There's far too much at stake.

As I prepare to go on to college and study Public Policy, I'm forever grateful to USSYP for allowing me to be dazzled by the ways that ordinary Americans like me can make a difference; for permitting me to become lifelong friends with some of the most talented members of generation, knowing full well that we're about to change the world; for inspiring me to synthesize my passions for writing, racial justice, and democracy; for letting me eat five-course meals with the leaders I've only read about in textbooks; and for blowing my mind and warming my heart, every single day.

So USSYP: thank you so much for everything. And to my fellow USSYP delegates: see you in Congress, in about twenty years. We should probably coordinate our presidential runs.