

Scott Sawaya, KS – 2019

When I first discovered the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), I was doing what every senior in high school does on a Friday night, clicking through scholarships on Fastweb. The moment I saw it pop up with “Senate” in the title, I knew it was something that I had to pursue, and the more I learned about the program, the stronger I felt that I had to do everything in my power to be accepted as a delegate and attend Washington Week. In the following weeks I scoured American history books, I replaced my running playlist with NPR’s Civics 101 and Morning Edition podcasts and poured over past delegate essays. Needless to say, overjoyed does not even begin to describe the many emotions that I was feeling when I was informed that I had been selected as a delegate. I knew that it was going to be an incredible experience, but even so I couldn’t help but be blown away by just how amazing it truly was. I arrived expecting to learn a lot about the intricacies of how our federal government works, and while I certainly did, my main takeaway from Washington Week was not defined by the current state of our nation, but what it has the potential to become.

One of the things that struck me upon arrival, was that you could literally walk up to anyone and have an amazing conversation regarding just about anything, especially politics. Whether we were eating an incredible meal, hanging out on the mezzanine, or almost hitting a government employee’s car outside the State Department, engaging with my fellow delegates was by far the best part of the week. It was incredible to see just how quickly we were all able to connect with each other and become great friends in such a short period of time. The hardest part of the week was leaving knowing we were going to be scattered back across the nation having just formed incredible friendships and become a true USSYP family (I still struggle to listen to the song “Lean on Me”). Thanks to the wonders of modern technology, however, the United States Senate Youth Program has not stopped since I got home. As we have continued to engage with each other, the invaluable nature of these relationships has only become more apparent as we celebrate each other’s accomplishments and college acceptances and discuss the ever-evolving political landscape that continues to define our nation.

Not only were my fellow delegates a truly incredible group of people to get to know, so were the Military Mentors that taught and guided us throughout the week. After having the opportunity to engage with several of them on a personal level, it is impossible to not have an overwhelming sense of pride and respect for the United States Military. They truly are American heroes, not only because of the difficult sacrifices that they make for our nation, but also because of the way that they choose to live their lives with an uncorrupted sense of kindness and respect for everyone that they interact with. It was a powerful experience to stand alongside them as a wreath was laid at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the Arlington National Cemetery. Getting to learn from and interact with Captain Lin and all of the other Military Mentors was definitely a highlight of my week in D.C.

While there, we got to hear from some of the most powerful people in not just the United States, but also the world. It was so humbling and inspiring to witness their own personal humility and devotion to serving the American people. Deputy Director of National Intelligence Susan Gordon, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Paul J. Selva, and Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough are just a few of the examples that stick out in my mind of some of the most inspiring examples of people that make personal sacrifices for the good of the nation on a regular basis and do so with an attitude of humility and gratitude. Even though it may not always feel like it, these experiences taught me that there are a lot of great people leading this nation, and we cannot take that for granted.

It is hard to describe the emotions that were inspired by the many astounding places that we visited. From the Pentagon to Mount Vernon, we truly got to be a part of the many places that not only shaped our nation but continue to do so today. I have to admit it was pretty cool walking past the main visitor line into the Capitol building or going on a self-guided tour of the East Wing of the White House. Not only did we get to hear from a multitude of amazing people in some unforgettable places, but I also have to mention that we also got to eat in some pretty cool places as well. Not many people get to say they had dinner right across from the Constitution or ate a chocolate strawberry in the Kennedy Caucus Room after meeting their senator. I also have to mention that The Mayflower Hotel has become a second home for me, and I will always cherish the memories I made throughout that hotel with my fellow delegates.

It will be hard for me to forget the amazing opportunity that I had to speak at the State Department. Because the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, is from Kansas, I had the honor of giving the appreciation remarks once he had finished speaking. I'll admit it was a little overwhelming to stand at the podium of the Benjamin Franklin State Dining room, and if you ever want to stress about lunch etiquette try eating a salad next to the man that is fourth in line to be president and has met Kim Jong Un. Ultimately, it proved to be an unforgettable experience and inspired me to appreciate the importance of diplomacy, especially in our current global society.

Overall, it is not even close to an overstatement to say that the United States Senate Youth Program was one of the best weeks of my life and has strongly impacted the person that I am today and who I want to become. I feel so grateful to not only have had the opportunity to now be an alumnus of the USSYP, but also a citizen of the United States of America. If there is one thing that my time there has taught me, it's that even though we are facing a lot of problems in society, we are well equipped with some incredible people that I know will be a force for good in not just America, but also the world. I can't wait to see what my fellow delegates and I will accomplish in the coming years, and the United States Senate Youth Program has empowered and inspired us in ways that will continue to be realized as we work together to help form a more perfect union.