

## Nicholas Howard, MD – 2019

### Defining America

Throughout our nation's history, many writers, politicians, and activists have tried to define what America is. For John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, America was "a city upon a hill." For Emma Lazarus, author of the *New Colossus*, America was a refuge for "... huddled masses yearning to breathe free." For President Kennedy, America was the nation where citizens "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Every individual who has lived, or attempted to live the American dream, has come to identify the United States as something different to them, something unique to the individual. Prior to my experience with the United States Senate Youth Program, I could not find my definition of America. I had read the words of those before me but I had never been able to recognize what America was. Through that life-changing week in March 2019, however, I learned what America means to me. I now realize that we live in the land of diversity, of humanity, and hope.

The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) seeks to model a potential future Senate by selecting two individuals from each state, as well as the District of Columbia and the Department of Defense Education Activity. With each delegate selected, regardless of the distance traveled, a different background and perspective was represented. The diversity within our group led to better discussion and more robust understanding. Individually, each delegate was intelligent and opinionated, but together not only were we those qualities, but we used our collective talents to begin finding solutions to the problems within our communities. Beyond the delegates I met, though, I found our speakers' ranging backgrounds and opinions to be stimulating. America, founded on protecting the minority opinion, has strong, well-established parties dedicated to defending the specific platforms. Our speakers reestablished a belief in me that our leaders, while standing for different beliefs at heart, wish to see our country succeed. After listening to my fellow delegates and speakers, I unequivocally acknowledge that a large portion of our country is ready to embrace our differences.

It was also through USSYP that I learned how innately human the institutions of our government are. Prior to my Washington Week visit, my own experiences with the leaders of our government had been watching them give speeches on the television or reading about them in the newspaper. To some extent, I would have considered them to be more celebrities than public servants. My week in Washington, though, changed my understanding of our leaders and our government. I learned, sometimes discreetly while other times more blatantly, that our leaders think just as we do, act just as we do, and speak just as we do. I heard from Chief Justice John Roberts exclaim that he sees the face of God in every human. From Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, I learned that even the most impressive public servants make mistakes. At first, I will admit, this newfound perspective about our leaders was shocking and scary. Our democracy, something that is supposed to be protector for our fundamental, natural rights, is fallible to the faults of our very normal leaders. But, after reflection, I realized that this is how it should be. It's how President Lincoln put it "A government of the people, by the people, for the people," and that's exactly what we have.

I also came to see America in a place of hope that I had never viewed it before. I've read many books and speeches about how America was built upon freedom from tyranny and as a haven for immigrants. I've seen numerous accounts of how millions

have tried to achieve their own version of the American Dream. I am a bit disheartened to say, though, that I had never truly felt that presence in my life. From my uneventful town in Maryland, the idea of the American spirit and American Dream seemed more fiction than reality. I thank the Hearst Foundations and the United States Senate Youth Program for changing my outlook. From the alumni visitation day to smiling with my senator, I learned that there is a spirit within our nation, one composed of hope, opportunity, and liberty, that is truly embedded in the fabric of our society. To me, it was the idea that I, an adopted boy from Russia, could go as far as I have in this world. It was the idea that I could represent my community in front of the leaders living our history. And for as much as I wish to believe I am inherently unique or special, I know that my selection to this program was hard work and support - something most in America can achieve. I know now that America is the place of hope because there is no other place in this world I could have the opportunities I've had.

My definition of America is one that fits my experiences and ideas. For others, the definition will be more positive, some will perhaps be negative. The fact of the matter is that one's definition cannot be wrong or right; America's definition is the culmination of ideas, thoughts, experiences, perspectives, and interactions an individual has in their lifetime. What matters beyond that definition, though, is what the individual plans to do with it. For me, I plan to go into public service and help others shape their definition of America - just as the Hearst Foundations did for me. Perhaps *this* is the true idea of America, just as Winthrop, Lazarus, Kennedy, and countless others believed: America is the place where people are called upon to give back, to be volunteers for a cause greater than themselves.