

Serena Smith, MI – 2019

My experience with the 57th annual USSYP

The 57th annual United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), as likely all delegates would be quick to tell you, was an incredible experience. Reflecting back, it is difficult to pinpoint one speaker, event, or aspect of the program that resonated with me the most, because every moment held value. I remember walking into the ballroom of The Mayflower Hotel on the first afternoon we arrived and recognizing faces of influential politicians on the poster boards holding pictures of past conferences, and then being able to meet some of those alumni during the week and knowing that the students that this program selects, and the work that each individual does is really something special and will without a doubt change the world.

The entire week was a whirlwind of unforgettable experiences. When talking to some alumni during the very first evening, they urged me and my fellow delegates to soak it all in, and take everything we could from the experience. I was surprised to find that smaller moments during the week held as much significance to me as speaking to some of the most powerful people working in the capital did. Talking policy with young people who actually cared was refreshing and inspiring to me. During those times I learned a lot about the value of patience. It is far easier to brush off dissenting opinions as wrong than it is to listen with a willingness to change, but what is easy is not always what is right. I found that engaging in dialogue about policies or listening to speakers that I did not politically align with was difficult but nonetheless very rewarding. Becoming friends with my fellow delegates was one of my favorite parts of Washington Week. I have never seen as many politically active youth in one room, and the energy that was created was electrifying. A favorite moment that I was able to witness was the reaction of speakers when they received their first question from a delegate. They were often surprised at the detail and depth of the questions they received. The delegates I meet during that week were fearless and awe-inspiring.

Washington Week gave me an insider look in to how the capital functions in a way that I had never seen before. We toured the Capitol, the White House, the Library of Congress, the Supreme Court building, Mount Vernon, and other history-rich places. I stepped foot into ground on which policy changes that affect the entire country happen, walked in hallways that presidents like Abraham Lincoln have walked, and gazed into mirrors that George Washington once looked into. I listened to Senator Richard Blumenthal speak as we ate dinner mere feet away from the Declaration of Independence and listened as the Supreme Court Justice of the United States answered questions. Having the privilege to take part in these experiences and interact with important individuals helped me to understand the sheer amount of people and teamwork running the United States federal government requires, and how important teamwork, drive, bipartisanship, and patience is. It motivated me to aim to one day end up on Capitol Hill as well and helped me gain empathy.

When asking delegates what they gained from Washington Week, all of us would say that we gained a life-changing and awe-inspiring experience. I gained not only motivation to work on Capitol Hill, but patience, and empathy. The U.S. Senate Youth Program helped me realized what I want to do with my life, and was a week that I will never forget.