

Kaitlin Ahern, PA – 2019

“A house divided against itself cannot stand.” Even in 1858, soon-to-be President Abraham Lincoln understood that political divisiveness is not always a solution of problems, but rather a crack in the beating heart of our democracy. Today, although nearly two-hundred years have passed since this declaration, President Lincoln’s words still ring true. Now is a time of political distress. The media consistently covers stories where lawmakers and executives clash with no compromises, and there seem to be new wedge topics arising on Capitol Hill each day. For some, it may seem as though the days of peaceful resolutions and metaphorical olive branch extensions are long gone. At the very inception of our great nation our Founding Fathers warned us of the dangers of political factions, citing that they would cause civil unrest and deep-seated turmoil. I had long been the type of constituent who was satisfied only listening to news that corresponded with my beliefs. I was content only understanding opinions that validated my own, and only agreeing with those who in turn agreed with me. There were points in my life where I confidently said I disliked politicians simply because of their partisan affiliation without ever having researched their individual platform or ideals. I believed, with all of my being, that this was politics. The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) helped me grow beyond this toxic mindset and open my mind to the true wonder of politics: compromise.

The focus of this paper, my friends, is on you rather than on the incredible speakers we heard from and the life-changing events we had the honor of attending. The reason for this is that I feel as though you, the people, were the most impactful of all during my experience at the United States Senate Youth Program! Although you are not presidents, or Cabinet secretaries, or senators (yet), you have all taught me more than I can begin to elaborate upon in this brief testimonial.

During Washington Week, I was exposed to a beautifully diverse array of opinions and values that represented both who you were and where you hailed from in our great nation. It is true that each delegate shared differing stances on wedge topics such as immigration, abortion, and social services. There was one thing, however, we all believed in no matter how we politically aligned ourselves. This is how much unwavering love and dedication we have for both the United States of America and those people who call it home. Our time at USSYP was filled with respectful discussions as opposed to screaming matches. It was filled with curious and calm debating in lieu of aggressive and demeaning verbal attacks. Through these experiences, I have learned that there is more than one side to the same story and that all politicians should make the conscious effort to understand all voters regardless of affiliation. This is what has impacted me the most during our short time together. In the span of seven tiny days, a group of 104 teenage strangers were able to accomplish the seemingly impossible in the political sphere. We were able to listen, compromise, and reach across the proverbial political aisle to engage with those on the other side. This, if nothing else, has shown me that we truly can heal our beautiful democracy to its potential.

Politics is not simply capitalizing on those who share one’s common mindset. Politics is also challenging oneself and pushing one’s boundaries to the point well beyond the zone of complacency and comfort. It is compromise just as much as it is winning a debate. It is re-evaluation just as much as it is confidence. It is patriotism, it is respect, and it is certainly a Nut Free Zone™. Most importantly of all, politics is the United States Senate Youth Program.