

Tamica Smith, WY – 2022

Throughout my years, I have continuously heard the figure of speech. *“Life is like a book.”* People use this expression to talk about how life has a beginning and an ending, and reference that life has lots of plot twists. Truth be told, I like to think of my life as a series of chapters. Sometimes they are long and sometimes the chapters are relatively short in my life. I enjoy using this metaphor in a comparative way; therefore, I will explain my experience at the United States Senate Youth Program as another chapter of my book. While I was participating in the program there are three main things that resonated with me, allowing a change in perspective and attitude.

In the beginning of my experience, I could make the claim that I live a very sheltered life, with a limited understanding of “other people's stories.” I have lived my life barely communicating with people outside of my state. In turn, I've retained a very narrow lens of America. I could not even entertain the basic understanding of politics from other people's books or their way of living. I have access to the internet; however, most of the media portrays states in one light, even though there are many more “chapters” to each one. While in attendance at this program I was given the chance to see a little more of the states. One main event that helped with this, was the welcome video. This video allowed us delegates to hear small facts about each state in a creative way. Every delegate had a distinguishing video that informed every single person in the zoom meetings about them individually and about their state. Another piece that allowed me to see more “books” was in our Military Mentor groups. In these small groups we discussed specifics from our towns and state. I learned about humorous things, such as how in some states the thickness of pizza is vital. I was also given the opportunity to hear how they themselves see politics and how that is transferred into their daily lives and their states. It was interesting to hear about the different “plot lines” that occur, simply because of a change in “setting.” These interactions changed my perspective towards states. I've come to the realization that while every state is different, America is more united because of these differences.

While my perspective changed, so did my attitude towards people across America. I was once involved in another activity that was done on the national level. When I attended the event bipartisanship was not a standard expressed. In turn, people began to divide themselves by political beliefs. The rooms were divided. There was a clear minority, and I was a part of it. In turn, my attitude was pushing my voice louder. I believed the only way to be heard was to speak.

However, the United States Senate Youth Program showed me this isn't the case. Every distinguished guest talked about crossing the aisle and communicating with people. One specific speaker that resonated with me was the very first guest speaker: Colorado Senator Cory Gardner. He made many statements about crossing the aisle. One of my favorite statements he said was “firm in my principles but flexible in my detail.” He talked about just because someone may have a different opinion does not make them evil. This resonated with me because of my personal experience with crossing the aisle. I am so excited to see delegates and distinguished guests/ speakers inform us, to live our lives by crossing the aisle. This made me see my “book” and other people's “books” differently.

Truth be told, I cannot say that these are the only two alterations to my life from the United States Senate Youth Program. I have a completely different perspective of politics and people. I will never be able to see the world the same way. I would not change my experience there. I genuinely wish that this program could have been done in person, but even without it being in person I had a lot of take-away. I thank every person who allowed me the opportunity to participate in the program. I feel the deepest gratitude towards everyone, who helped me write another chapter to my amazing book!