

Baden Francis, DoDEA – 2024

"There is a debt of service due from every man to his country, proportioned to the bounties which nature and fortune have measured to him."

Thomas Jefferson

Every now and then we are given an incredible opportunity: the chance to experience something that completely changes our view of the world and our placement within it.

The memories of these opportunities hold a special place in our hearts. They leave a lasting impression and shape us into who we are - while also helping us understand the kind of person we want to become.

Oftentimes, these experiences that mean the most to us are the ones that can never quite be understood by anyone else. We simply cannot share the deep emotion associated with the memories. However, even though nobody will ever truly know what they mean, we still have a burning desire within us to share their stories and messages.

This is how I feel about my week at the U.S. Senate Youth Program - where I spent 7 days in Washington, D.C. with 103 of the most intelligent, thoughtful, ambitious, capable, and humorous youth our great nation has to offer.

Three things impacted me about this opportunity - the people, the places, and the ideas. Each played an integral part in making my week in our nation's capital memorable.

The people -

Everyone I met at USSYP was incredible. From all walks of life, each person present became part of and added something to the USSYP community. They were quite literally the brightest minds our nation has to offer.

Each had a unique life story, but one key factor was the same: they all were leaders in their own home community. From serving as youth representatives on state boards of education to starting a 501(c) nonprofit dedicated to promoting civil activism, it was truly inspiring to hear from each of my peers what they were involved with and how they were making a difference.

In the beginning, if somebody had told me these fellow youths would feel like family by the end of the week, I wouldn't have believed them. However, that is indeed what happened.

My fellow "delegates" inspired me to reach further, jump higher, think deeper, try harder, and dream bigger. Though it may sound cliché, I do feel comforted knowing that the future of our nation lies in the arms of the friends - turned family - I made this week.

The places -

Washington, D.C. is home to a diverse spread of architecture. From the modern style Hart Senate Offices to the Greek pillars where President Lincoln is honored, each building has a special purpose and each memorial has a unique story to tell.

Although diverse in appearance and use, something about the majesty and grandeur of the buildings in our nation's capitol city struck me as inspiring: Each one tells a story about America and its people.

The Washington Monument - our founding fathers who sought a higher and more perfect form of government

The Supreme Court Building - a group of thinkers who understood the significance of having government powers divided into separate institutions

The towering dome and sprawling wings of the Capitol Building - an expanding nation trying to determine its place in the world

The Lincoln Memorial - a nation, though once divided, proved to the world that democracy would conquer injustice in the end

Arlington National Cemetery - hundreds of thousands who believed in an ideal that they were willing to die for

The Department of State building - a modernizing nation that was rapidly becoming the leading world power

... and the list goes on. America is full of rich history, and the structures built on its soil told that inspired history to me.

The ideas -

After considering the events of this week, two ideas made themselves very clear to me.

The first - the idea that cooperation amongst groups of people with differing ideals is possible.

I clearly saw this as my fellow delegates and I were able to civilly discuss a wide variety of issues facing our nation. We came from every place on the political spectrum. However, this did not prevent us from working together and ultimately becoming friends. It was inspiring to see the level of cooperation that could occur when we recognized that our friendships mattered more than our philosophies.

The second - the idea that a democracy will only prosper when its citizens are actively engaged in its proceedings.

This week we talked to many government officials. Although their remarks were all very different, one theme was common through them all: we must be involved in our nation's democracy.

When everyone is involved, the power cannot be controlled by the hands of a few individuals and the general desire of the people will always dominate.

This was the entire purpose of the government our founding fathers created. To ensure that the people could rule themselves and not be controlled by corruption and deception.

However, even the founding fathers could not design a government that protected "natural rights" if the citizens were not actively engaged in protecting the integrity of the system and directing its actions.

The words inscribed on the front steps of the National Archives, the resting place of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, say it all: "Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty"

I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity I had to attend the 62nd annual United States Senate Youth Program. I hope to never forget this incredible opportunity I had. I am grateful for the places, the people, and the ideas that made my week memorable.