

UNITED STATES SENATE YOUTH PROGRAM WASHINGTON WEEK 2009

At the Smithsonian American Art Museum, there is a piece called “Preamble” that is made up of 50 license plates representing the 50 states of our nation that, when read out loud, phonetically spell out the Preamble of the United States Constitution. I saw this piece of artwork on my first full day of Washington Week with the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). This program, like the piece of art, brought together representatives from each state of our nation in order to gain a better understanding of and appreciation for our national government and its leaders. I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase “E. Pluribus Unum”—From many, one. However, have you felt it? I have felt this thrill—the thrill of knowing that the people that I am with, myself included, are representing an entire generation. Just like the license plates, we were from different states and different environments, but together, we formed a group of young leaders with pride in our nation—a nation that, like us, was experiencing confidence in the past, motivation for the present, and hope for the future. We did not only believe in “E. Pluribus Unum”—we embodied it.

So began one of the greatest weeks of my life. Throughout the week, I participated in many open and honest debates with my fellow delegates about everything from the current state of the United States economy, to the use of biofuels in Brazil, to the best way to eat a white chocolate Capitol Building. By “picking the brains” of my peers from across the country, I learned about their ways of life and how their environments have affected their perspectives and points of view. I can truly say that the 103 other delegates that I encountered are some of the most highly-motivated, determined, compassionate, intelligent people that I have met, and it was such an incredible experience to be able to spend time and develop relationships with them. I know that many of the friendships that I made during that week will be with me for many years to come.

Going “behind-the-scenes” of the United States Government and meeting many of its leaders brought history to life in a whole new way. It added another dimension to my knowledge of the United States and its government that cannot be achieved solely through studying textbooks. We were actually out there, in the field, learning from those who know it best. That hands-on, first person experience opened my eyes to a wealth of opportunities and knowledge. The opportunity to meet so many influential leaders at such a young age was an incomparable experience. Words cannot begin to describe the feeling in the air as President Barack Obama walked toward our group of excited, nervous, speechless delegates. Hearing the Leader of the Free World tell us that we were outstanding leaders was completely surreal, and as I shook his hand and looked into his eyes, I knew that I, too, can do great things.

There were seventeen Military Mentors who accompanied us throughout the week and they were some of the most remarkable people that I have ever met. Hearing the stories about their lives, their experiences, and what they’ve seen gave me a broader understanding of not just our Armed Forces, but also of

the world. Watching the Military Mentors receive their folded American flags from the United States Capitol Building on the last night was more moving than I could have ever imagined. Looking into their eyes, I could see their passion for that flag and all that it represents. As I saw this, I realized that this infectious passion had indeed permeated my own heart and at that moment I knew that I would never be the same. America was no longer just my country of residence; it was my home. I felt a newfound duty toward my nation and my fellow Americans. I realized that this country was built upon citizens, like these Military Mentors, who were ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

On our last day, the Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff met with us at the Pentagon. When he asked one of the Military Mentors what he had learned over the course of the week, the Military Mentor answered “I learned that this country’s future is in good hands.” That is what I learned too, but I also realized that I am a part of those hands. Over the course of the week, I learned that I truly do have the power to affect change by serving others, fighting for what I believe in and what I am passionate about and, in fact, that it is my duty to do so. I owe it to the nation and to myself. I experienced and was a part of the inspirational hope and optimism that the youth of today lives by—a hope and optimism that we must not let fade away, for it is what this country needs. This experience has opened my eyes to the many different facets of the government and the careers within them. Knowledge of each of these facets was necessary to expand my knowledge of the government and meeting all of the delegates from the different states complemented this by giving me a broader understanding of the nation as a whole. I believe that I am now a better citizen with a deeper love for my country and its government and leaders. Perhaps I will be among their ranks in the future. I now know that anything is possible for me. In the words of former President John F. Kennedy, “Let the world go forth from this time and place to friend and foe alike that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans.”

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