

We live in a time in which we are confronted by problems of great magnitude that have very real, tangible effects on people worldwide. Take, for instance, the problem of clean water accessibility; about 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water, and about 2.6 billion people lack basic sanitation. When our eyes are opened and we are able to see not only the repercussions of these problems on those who are directly affected, but also on our country's security, on the global economy, and on national and international policy, we are given an opportunity unparalleled in excellence to become the force of positive change that we seek. Identifying a problem is the first step to finding a solution; leaders are created with the fusion of focus, passion, and vision.

It is opportunities like the U.S. Senate Youth Program that enable young leaders to find their voice, to find their focus, and to find their vision. Meeting and interacting with public figures such as President Barack Obama, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Michael Leiter, Brian Lamb, General Selva, and Ambassador Patriota is inspiring and intellectually stimulating. To gain the insight of people who have touched so many lives through their extraordinary efforts is an incredibly deep experience; it offers a unique perspective that provides the thoughtful scholar with real world connections that bring ideas to fruition. To interact with people of such high caliber and moral integrity challenges young leaders to rise to the same level, to generate ideas and thought-provoking questions that reflect the promise of youth.

The passion, however, comes from the people who choose to embark on the journey of service together, the people who are identified as those who will inherit the responsibility of creating solutions. Being surrounded by other students so devoted to service forced me to, as Major Cox said, "Bring my A-game," every moment of every day. Every delegate brought something unique to the table, and it was this diversity of thought that caused such interesting interactions and generated such intriguing ideas. As Michael Leiter said, modern technology and ideas are what provide him with optimism about the future, and it is in today's youth – the delegates attending the U.S. Senate Youth Program – that these ideas can be found. But what USSYP showed us was that these 104 voices – despite their different tunes – can rise together to create a beautiful, unified melody, demonstrating that we all are tied together by our passion for making the world a better place. The military mentors were equally as inspiring; their patriotism, humility, and integrity stirred within us a deeper sense of devotion to our country. It is because of them that we are able to make a difference and leave our mark on the world; it is because of them that America continues to be the "land of the free and the home of the brave."

For me, participating in the U.S. Senate Youth Program was the opportunity of a lifetime; it was a chance to be part of something far greater than myself. I emerged from it with an increased sense of focus and conviction to make a difference through service, and I was able to build wonderful memories that will remain with me for the rest of my life. Perhaps most striking was simply being in the presence of such amazing people – the other delegates, the military mentors, the speakers, and the Hearst Foundation guests – and being given the honor to be considered one of them. My interactions with people of such integrity, patriotism, and commitment to improving the lives of others in such a formative time of my life will have a profound impact on my decisions in the future. Senator Carper’s statement that the secret to happiness is serving others resonated deeply with me and reinforced the purpose of the U.S. Senate Youth Program; rather than being just a program to honor accomplishment, USSYP is an experience meant to inspire future accomplishment. It provides a forum for young leaders to come together to share ideas and create lifetime connections. And in doing so, it instilled in all of us and will continue to instill in future delegates a commitment to making the world a better place through service, reminding us that we have been fortunate enough to be given an education, to be given such incredible opportunities, and that this privilege is the very thing that gives us such a great responsibility to be a positive force of change.

I am proud, honored, and humbled to be a member of the USSYP family. It is my belief that experiences like this make us stronger. Every element of the USSYP experience provided us with a common vision of positive change that we can accomplish together, regardless of background and beliefs. No matter what our futures hold, we will always be connected by the fact that we have the means and the responsibility to make a difference, and that our experiences in the U.S. Senate Youth Program solidified this mission as a priority in our lives. So as I embark on my personal path of service, I will be forever grateful to the U.S. Senate Youth Program and all those who made it so special and inspiring.

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