

Steven Lee – CT - 2011

Closing in on my junior year in high school, the question of what I want to do in my future keeps coming up. I have never been able to truthfully answer that question, simply because I've never had any idea. Luckily, I was nominated for the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) by Westhill's history department, which allowed me to consider politics.

I was contacted about a month after completing my application by my school principal and was informed that I had been chosen as one of the top 18 applicants and would be given the chance to have an interview. Intimidated, I went into Hartford for my interview, and just like the 17 other Connecticut applicants, anxiously waited. About two weeks later, my school principal called my house and informed me that I would be representing Connecticut as one of two delegates at the USSYP. As excited as I was, I had no idea what lay in store for me.

However, I seemed to subconsciously start to follow the news more carefully and pay closer attention to politics. It gave me the idea that politics could be an accurate answer for that dreaded "future" question.

I received an email from the program director before we arrived with a list of names of the people who would be addressing us during the conference, which was the week of March 5-12. The list consisted of President Barack Obama, Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska, Senator John Cornyn of Texas, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Clarence Thomas, Secretary of Energy Steven Chu, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Director of the CIA Leon Panetta, Deputy Secretary of Defense William J. Lynn, III, Under Secretary of State Maria Otero, Congressman Cory Gardner of Colorado (a USSYP alumnus), Ambassador Namik Tan of Turkey, Former Chief Judge Robert H. Henry, U.S. Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals (a USSYP alumnus), C-SPAN Founder and CEO Brian Lamb, and the Senior Vice President of Strategy and Innovation for Habitat for Humanity International, Dave McMurtry.

It would be hard to say my favorite speaker was anyone but President Obama. Along with all of the other delegates, I patiently awaited the President's arrival in the East Room of the White House. Not only were we in a room that is not open to the public, but we were also waiting to be addressed by the President of the United States. It is hard to describe what I was feeling at the time, but when the President walked into the room, my face lit up and the room broke out in applause. He spoke to us about the country's future and how it is our duty to participate in some form of public service in our future. When asked how he imagined the nation in 20 years, he responded, "I am very confident that our problems regarding education, the economy, war, and more, will be reduced due to the young men and women in this room." It was so great to hear the President say something personal about a group that I was a part of. He said that it's young adults like us who make him have a positive outlook on the future. It is always great to see the President make an address on television, but it was truly something different when I saw it in person. Along with the other politicians I heard that week, he made me realize that America's public figures are really just regular people like you and me who set their mind to something and accomplished their goals.

When Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska addressed us, he gave me a message that I have and will strive to live by: "You can't win, unless you are willing to risk losing."

In addition to great speakers, we were given the opportunity to tour some of the most secure buildings in the world. We went into the White House, the Pentagon, where we met with the Deputy Secretary of Defense (second in charge of the military), and the CIA, where we met with Leon Panetta, director of the CIA, and other CIA personnel. We were later informed that some of the personnel were undercover.

Although I was able to listen to some of the most notable politicians, the most memorable part of the trip was the other 103 delegates I befriended over the course of the week. While it was incredible to be able to meet kids from every state in our nation, they weren't just normal students. It was a group of the brightest and most welcoming students I've ever met. It was inspiring to be surrounded by young adults that may very well be the next Senator, United States Supreme Court Justice, or even President of the United States. It gave me hope knowing that I was part of that group, and if I am willing to risk the worst, I can just as well be one of those positions in the future.