

DOD – Ryan McDonnell

I remember quite distinctly the moment I first heard about the United States Senate Youth Program. It was a typical chilly English day in early September; summer vacation had just ended and school was back in session. My school's student government director mentioned the program during a meeting and announced that all officers were eligible to apply. My interest piqued, I decided on a whim to submit an application. Although I didn't know it at the time, it would be one of the best decisions of my life.

Two tests and an interview later, I received my selection notification from the Hearst Foundation. I was ecstatic; the value of such an opportunity was beginning to dawn on me. I began to get to know my fellow delegates via Facebook, at least as much as England's time difference would allow.

After months of anticipation, it was finally time to fly to Washington, D.C. to meet 103 of the most interesting and talented students from across the country. The trip got off to an inauspicious start: upon my arrival at Dulles International Airport, I had no idea what to do or where to go. I called the number printed on my USSYP badge and inquired as to what to do next. I was informed that my school had sent the wrong flight information to the program staff and that, according to their records, I was not due to arrive until the following day. Cursing the inefficiency of school bureaucracies, I listened as the program staff was forced to improvise and directed me to take a taxi (compliments of the Hearst Foundation) to the Mayflower Hotel. This was just a glimpse of the outstanding attention and hospitality I would receive throughout the week.

I experienced some remarkable things during my time in Washington – visiting the CIA, hearing from the Secretaries of Energy and Education, walking the lengthy corridors of the Pentagon, and meeting such incredible figures as Justice Clarence Thomas and President Obama. I could probably discourse for several days on these topics, but in attempt to be concise I will focus on the single most incredible aspect of the week: the other 103 delegates. Prior to the trip, I had never been given the opportunity to interact with such well-informed and like-minded peers. The United States Senate Youth Program certainly fulfilled that desire! The confluence of fifty states' worth of culture, ideas, and talents is a special sight to behold and an amazing thing to experience (and on a slightly tangential note, I was pleasantly surprised by the dancing skills exhibited by the delegates).

My fellow delegates inspired me with their passionate interest in the pressing issues of today. One cannot help but get excited for the future when in the presence of such raw intelligence, energy, and enthusiasm. Before Washington, I had never seriously considered a career in public service; now, it is difficult to imagine a more rewarding career path. Whether they know it or not, my fellow delegates and the Hearst Foundation have utterly altered my future course for the better, and I am more grateful than words can express.

Of course, all things must come to an end, and Washington Week did exactly that much sooner than I would have liked. Amidst my sadness at the conclusion of the program, I took consolation in one thing: I could now take the things I had learned and experienced back to my community and use them to positively impact the world. I believe many of the other delegates echoed these sentiments. If Washington taught me anything, it inspired me to use the gifts I have been blessed with to better the society that made them possible. I would like to close by quoting one of my favorite political figures, Winston Churchill: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

-Ryan McDonnell