

Kevin Hirata – HI - 2011

If somebody had told me a year ago that I would meet the president of the United States, appear on local television, and befriend 103 of our nation's finest student leaders, I would not have believed it. In many ways, I still think that the United States Senate Youth Program's 2011 Washington Week was an unbelievable experience. It was an enormous privilege to meet several dozen of our nation's most influential leaders. Getting to know over a hundred highly impressive student delegates was also quite an honor. There is no question that I have a greater commitment to public service after participating in this unique and inspirational program.

One of the highlights of Washington Week was learning about the American government from those who know it best—national politicians. Each one of the speakers plays a key role in our country's political narrative, and all of the presentations shed light on the difficulties that policymakers face. For instance, I was fascinated when Justice Clarence Thomas explained how he had to balance his personal views and emotions with his constitutional judgment. Despite his high position as a justice on the Supreme Court, I was impressed by Justice Thomas' humility, honesty, and sense of ethics. Additionally, I appreciated CIA Director Leon Panetta's presentation because he provided a candid description of the CIA's current priorities, as well as a reality check on the agency's actual jurisdiction. Another noteworthy speaker was Dr. Steven Chu, the U.S. Secretary of Energy and a recipient of the Nobel Prize in Physics, who taught us about alternative power sources and the obstacles to improving the American energy infrastructure. The varied experiences and expertise of the speakers made me realize that there are numerous ways to serve our country.

Although I enjoyed all of the events during the week, two of the most memorable were the meeting with the President and the Senate Reception. Without doubt, it was a tremendous honor to meet the President. President Obama's remarks to the delegates and the manner in which he responded to our questions showed that he is a compassionate and forward-thinking leader. The Senate Reception was also an unforgettable experience because I was able to meet Hawaii Senators Daniel Akaka and Daniel Inouye, both of whom have led long and distinguished careers serving our nation. It was particularly interesting to talk to the Senators about their jobs and about how my future plans related to public service.

Another phenomenal aspect of the program was getting to know the other delegates. It was exciting to have the opportunity to exchange ideas with a group of individuals who share a passion for politics and history. We frequently had engaging conversations about topics as diverse as the origins of the American Revolution, the most over- and under-rated American presidents, and the Constitution's "full faith and credit" clause. Despite encountering a wide range of views on everything from the pros and cons of entitlements to the benefits of consuming brown rice over white rice, I found my fellow delegates to be very respectful of other perspectives. The thought that some of these extremely smart, talented people will become this country's leaders definitely gives me hope for the future. On a more personal level, I made some wonderful friends at Washington Week, and I hope to maintain their friendship for years to come.

Looking back on the U.S. Senate Youth Program's 2011 Washington Week, I can say with confidence that it was the best seven days of my life, and I must express my utmost gratitude to The Hearst Foundations for annually giving high school students the experience of a lifetime. Looking towards the future, I will "never take this country for granted," as CIA Director Panetta advised. This amazing program has unquestionably inspired me to do more to help others, and I look forward to a fulfilling life of serving my community and nation.