

Khayree Fitten – IA - 2011

Having made every attempt since October 2009 to return to the District of Columbia, I was not prepared for the overwhelming experience of interacting with the Washington elite and America's finest students during the 49<sup>th</sup> Annual United States Senate Youth Program.

The opening day allowed me to meet the alumni of the Program who were truly making a difference in their service to our country. It also allowed me plenty of listening time, which was humbling as I am usually the mouthpiece of policy perspectives in my high school of 650. But, listening, albeit cynically, to Ariel Zlatovski talk about his desire to change the world without a college education, or Jordan Rasmusson describe his disagreements with the *FEC v. Citizens United* Supreme Court decision, permitted me to hear the voices of America; liberal, conservative, and in between.

Not only did I hear America, I saw it all throughout Washington Week. I heard my favorite Supreme Court justice, Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, tell me how he struggled in segregationist Georgia, but still liked being black, even before it was cool. His candidness was amazing, but he left me with an awe-inspiring thought on how to make the tough decisions, not only on the bench but in life, "Everything in my life has prepared me for this moment in time." I will carry this with me when I go to make a college decision next year, and for the tough decisions beyond.

I heard Congressman Cory Gardner, one of my heroes in the class of 84 freshman Republicans, tell me that, "You are not here to be a part of history. You are here to make history." Coming from a member of the USSYP alumni family, there can be no doubt of the ramifications of being a USSYP delegate.

The last of my favorite adult speakers of the week was Undersecretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs Maria Otero. The way she outlined, in the beyond elegant State Department Dining Room, the impact youth and women are having in the world truly spoke to me, especially because of the work I do with the Iowa Department of Human Rights as a youth advocate and representative.

The week ended with a joint speech by my dear friend Meg MacInnes and Scotie Conner, which described our role as the hero generation. Truer words were never said. Due to the lack of political will of those currently in Washington, our generation will be the heroes solving the difficult problems.

I cannot stress how much my military mentor, Captain John Brownell of the Nevada Air Force National Guard, my charming Southern roommate, Adam Caldwell, the late night dances and choir sessions, and genuine friendliness of all the delegates made it the best experience of my life.

The tears I cried as my plane lifted off from Dulles International Airport were the emotional culmination of a city and of the people who I then knew had changed my life. I then remembered one of my favorite quotes by Dr. Seuss, "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened."

I will be forever grateful to the United States Senate for allowing us to be their guests, the Hearst Foundations for their amazing funding and sponsorship of the program, and all the unsung heroes who made our week possible, Ms. Rayne Guilford and all other staff.