

Madison Ashley - LA - 2011

As I rolled my luggage up, brain fuzzy from an in-flight nap, something was off as I found myself amid a group of people that were decidedly West Coast. Where were my Alabamans and Texans with their southern drawls and polite greetings? A four hour flight delay and rainstorm, it would seem, had landed me on the bus with the group of delegates traveling from states with surf cultures, sustainability, and a decidedly liberal bent- things Louisiana could only dream of. Welcome to Washington Week 2011.

An overarching theme of Washington Week was the coupling of education with fun. An incredible speaker series featuring Justice Clarence Thomas, numerous senators, the Secretaries of Education and Energy as well as President Obama himself, all gave incredible insight into the lives of Washington's top policy makers and politicians. I was especially impressed by the candor of the four departmental heads of the CIA who spoke with an honesty that belied their job description. To my delight, learning at USSYP was truly experiential- walking through the halls of the State Dept, the Capitol and yes, the White House, gave a great perspective on life in DC. On our frequent trips to the Senate office building, we were delighted by an unforeseen sense of normalcy: Senator Kerry chatting with his interns, Senator McCain strolling the hall, or the numerous Senators rushing to the Capitol minutes before a session was set to begin.

My peers were a wealth of knowledge that rivaled the Washington elite. As a junior, I relished the opportunity to seek advice about college/life in general and soon discovered 103 other highly motivated individuals with aspirations, activities, and music tastes so like my own. Our group developed an enviable repartee between conservatives and liberals, one defined by its civility and respect for differing opinions. The memories I cherish are the seemingly trivial ones- fist pumping at the Lincoln Memorial with my closest friends, playing presidential hangman with the VIP's (and tricking them with the No Names), gushing over modern art in the National Gallery, countless lunch discussions that jumped from politics to pop culture, and bonding with my roommate and true sister over liberalism, love letters and so much more. The two dances, the surprise one on Wednesday and the more formal on Friday, stand out as truly memorable. It was here, in the "lesser ballroom" that the guys loosened their ties, the girls kicked off their heels, and everyone lost themselves in the music. Dancing and singing, crushed between the bodies of my friends, I felt an indescribable sense of patriotism and community.

I left Washington knowing that democracy is not an instant cup of coffee- that these people that I see on television, eyes sparkling and tie straightened, work immeasurably hard. But our Millennial generation, as our closing speakers reminded us, is unique. We are the future legislators, policy makers and ambassadors who will drop our partisan politics simply to go and take a turn on the dance floor. I cannot thank the Hearst Foundations enough for such an incredible opportunity. Now, ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming the future leaders of America and my closest friends, the delegates of USSYP 2011.