

Priyanka Menon - MI - 2011

Without a doubt, the United States Senate Youth Program changed my life. Breathing the same air as a sitting President tends to do that to a one's life. In that moment, I couldn't completely comprehend what was happening; only later, on the bus, did it actually dawn on me that I had met the President of the United States of America, the leader of the free world, the man whose campaign I had watched grow from day one. In that instant, I realized the impact the United States Senate Program had had on my life. Quite honestly, I was a new person.

When I first heard of my acceptance to the United States Senate Youth Program, I didn't believe it was true. I thought that perhaps it was an elaborate prank or scheme. I made my mother call the Michigan Department of Education, just to double check that I had actually been chosen as a delegate, that there wasn't another girl named Priyanka Menon who was the true recipient of this honor. I didn't believe there existed a program that would allow me to meet some of the greatest leaders of our country, the men and women I had looked up to for so long. After all, who was I to deserve this? I was just an eleventh grade student with a passion for politics; there are hundreds more kids like me. I had no clue what the United States Senate Youth Program saw in me.

But, I am so thankful for their choice. The week I spent in Washington DC with the 103 other delegates of the United States Senate Youth Program and our military mentors was without reservations one of the best weeks of my life. I met leaders in government and politics, people like Director of the CIA Leon Panetta and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. I was given the opportunity to ask Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas a question, a man who had formerly been somewhat of an enigma to me. I was allowed to meet some of the men and women who courageously served our nation, to learn some of the lessons they had to share. I met students from all over the country, from each of the fifty states in our nation; these students were an amazing, engaging group of people and they will continue to inspire for years to come. Washington Week was truly a week I will never forget.

To be frank, Washington Week was so much more than eating with an exorbitant amount of silverware, meeting the President, and making 103 lifelong friends. It was a week that changed my perception of myself and the world. At the end of the week, on my flight back to Michigan, I realized that I have the potential to be a leader as well, that one day I could be standing in President Obama's shoes and greeting that year's group of delegates. Whatever I become in life, whatever I accomplish will in part be due to this week and the effect it had on me. Thanks Washington Week, I gained the strength to believe in myself.