

Robert Lauf - ND - 2011

I was in my sixth period economics class when I got the news. The principal, a very serious man by nature, chimed in over the PA system like he did from time to time with an announcement. I nonchalantly listened in as he announced that one student would be receiving a special honor this coming spring. My interest peaking, I became curious as to what he had to say. Instantly I thought of my application for the United States Senate Youth Program, but did not want to get too hopeful that this was the time I would learn my fate. Fortunately enough for me, it was the news I was hoping for. I was going to Washington.

Fast forward a few months and you would find a nervous North Dakotan flying to the nation's capitol with the hopes of meeting the countries' most influential figures. Upon my arrival, I knew that all of my hopes for this trip would be surpassed one thousand times over. Who knew that such an amazing group of young individuals could be brought together with one interest in mind, bettering themselves. I immediately felt at home with these new individuals, and found myself thinking that I had known them for many years. Lieutenant Coffman (whom I still keep in contact with) recognized me from across the room, and introduced me to my new USSYP family. My roommates, Corey Eldridge (TN) and Steven Lee (CT), were amazingly brilliant as well as entertaining. We had many conversations that commonly left me on the floor laughing. Our other group members, Neel Mandavilli (NC) and Sam Epstein (VT), were some of the most fun and interesting people I had ever met. I could not have asked for a better group. After an exciting night of mingling and events, I headed off to bed with the prospect of an even better tomorrow. I found myself staying up late watching episodes of "Modern Family" with my roommate, Steven Lee. This would end up being a staple of our evenings.

The speakers provided at the United States Senate Youth Program are nothing less than amazing, but one individual stood out from them all. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was surprisingly forthcoming in our time with him. The Supreme Court only allows thirty minutes to each side of a case in oral arguments, and yet we had around an hour and a half with him. His generosity of heart and fullness of life made for a thought-provoking experience that will forever change my view of the court system, politics, and life itself. His words of wisdom ranged from his thoughts on the first amendment, to eloquent quotes, such as, "I liked being black before it was cool." One wouldn't expect such frankness from a Justice notorious for his lack of words. He must have taken at least twenty questions during our time, and made us all feel important. He is the essence of what the United States Senate Youth Program stands for.

To sum up a life experience in a page seems unfair, most likely because it is. I cannot describe the new sense of hope, excitement, fervor, and patriotism this program has instilled in me. I, along with my fellow delegates, have been forever changed for the better. To all the staff, benefactors, and alumni, I truly say thank you for this once in a lifetime experience.