

Washington Week 2011 was one of the best in my life. A brief survey with any of the 104 delegates from across the nation will reveal that they hold similar opinions; however, it can never be said enough. From listening to President Obama to entering the Central Intelligence Agency, USSYP gave its delegates unheard of access to the city of Washington, D.C. When hearing speeches from high-ranking government officials, most delegates agreed the experience was indeed surreal. And yet, the speakers weren't the only part of the week that was surreal. The entire experience, from boarding the plane in Harrisburg and walking into the Mayflower Hotel for the first time, to the late night packing in my room after a night of dancing after the farewell dinner, was unbelievable.

The gravity of USSYP fully hit me after meeting with Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who, by far, was my favorite speaker. Having him answer my question—actually holding a dialogue with a Supreme Court Justice—was the highlight of my week. Justice Thomas connected and related well to his audience, held the attention of the delegates and dedicated well over his originally allotted time to us. Although his presentation contrasted to those of elected officials, his genuineness exhibited the humanness of all the United States officials.

The United States Senate Youth Program gave me the opportunity to meet officials most of the nation only watches on television. Seeing President Obama, Director Leon Panetta, my senators and, of course, Justice Thomas in person, without glass or a computer screen separating us—seeing them breathe and laugh and address delegates personally—proved that they are people just like me, and that one day I can and will be succeeding them in leading America. A delegate speaker at the farewell dinner stated, "This is our time!" And USSYP helped me realize that: it falls upon America's youth to take over for older generations; the alumni of USSYP, as well as all of America's youth, are the future of America, and it is our time, our responsibility, to take leadership and make an impact.