

Before I came to USSYP, I expected that I would have a great experience. I knew that I would have a chance to hear from some amazing speakers and that I would get to hone my political opinions through debate with some of the brightest kids around. What I couldn't anticipate, though, was how the program would change my entire life. USSYP is more than just a week in Washington; it is a way of life. The experience becomes a part of you, and it completely changes the way you look at the world. I thought I was open-minded before I came to Washington, but I had no idea just how much I had to learn. Listening to both speakers and other students share their unique perspectives on everything from TV shows to the state of our schools to neo-colonialism, I came to truly embrace the idea of bipartisanship and cooperation. The week forced me to confront biases and beliefs I didn't even know I had. My ideas were constantly challenged and, in a few cases, changed. After all, it's hard to forget the human cost of illegal immigration when one of your fellow delegates tells his own story, or to say that all Republicans are stupid when your best friend during the week is a hardcore Conservative. The thing is, though, labels didn't really seem to matter at USSYP. We weren't Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, or even New Jersey or Virginia: we were all just friends, a group of people where we all finally felt at home. For those who face apathy or even ridicule at their schools because of their passion for politics, USSYP is a haven. I discovered that there were other people out there who were excited about the same obscure, nerdy things I was, and the sense of community that developed was one of the best parts of the week.

More than a community, though, USSYP is family. From the very beginnings of our Facebook group, it was obvious that this was a group of people whose interest and enthusiasm wasn't going to be contained by one measly week. The friendships we made in Washington are stronger than some that I've had for years, and one of the best parts of my day is getting home and logging on Facebook to see what everyone is chatting about today. Even if I had gotten nothing else out of the week, I got to know some of the most amazing people I've ever met. I can now say that not only do I know two people from every state, but I have two people in each state who would be willing, and even excited, to let me stay with them. USSYP is full of some of the most intelligent, compassionate, thoughtful people that exist. No matter where we all end up in the future, I know that this group will go on to do amazing things, and I feel honored and blessed to have been included in the outpouring of love that is our USSYP family.

That's not to say that I didn't appreciate the speakers; in fact, having the opportunity to learn from and talk to some of the greatest thinkers in our country was a mind-blowing experience. The value, however, came not from the speakers themselves, but from the way they interacted with us. For the first time in my life, I was not spoken to as a child. The speakers addressed us as peers, taking our questions and concerns seriously and expecting us to be knowledgeable and curious about various topics. In talking to them, I gained a nascent sense of power. I am not just a teenager, unable to have any kind of an impact. I am an active, engaged citizen who is capable of great things. I discovered that my thoughts and ideas had weight and merit in their own right, and I became comfortable challenging officials on issues of concern. In short,

USSYP taught me to feel like I can, and will, do anything. I don't know where life may take me, but with the lessons I learned and the friends I gained during USSYP, I know that it will be amazing.