

Erica Turret – FL - 2011

On the day of my interview for the United States Senate Youth Program, I had just flown into Chicago for the Glenbrooks debate tournament. My interview was scheduled for 3 pm and at 2:55 pm I was still running around downtown Chicago frantically searching for a place with Wi-Fi so I could log on to Skype for my interview. All by myself, with no internet to be found, I nearly had a panic attack thinking that I had let USSYP fall out of my grasp. I called up the Florida Law Related Education Association crying and they let me do my interview nearly an hour later. I felt like a nervous wreck and had thought that that had surely come across to the panel of judges. I shut down my computer thinking that I would never get it, that my stress hadn't been worth it.

I couldn't have been more wrong. When I found out the next month that I had been selected as a Florida delegate, it was one of the happiest and most exciting moments of my life. I then called up my family and friends, belatedly joined the USSYP Facebook group and everyday became more and more anxious to start the week of a lifetime. Washington Week did not just live up to my expectations, it far surpassed them. I have always been a little shy around people whom I have just met, but I could not believe how at ease I felt with my fellow delegates. I made such great friends and for once in my life felt as if I fit in without having to change who I was the tiniest bit. From debating on the bus, to jumping on the beds with my roommate, I had the best time just hanging out with the most amazing and accomplished group of young leaders who I have ever met. From my fellow delegates and our amazing roster of speakers, I learned more in one week about our government than I have in all my years of schooling. I learned about the intricacies of the United States Senate, the civility and tradition of the Supreme Court and so much more through incredible first hand experiences that I will never forget.

Just to stand in the room with President Barack Obama and have him speak directly to our group was like a dream come true. To have a face to face discussion with Associate Justice Clarence Thomas and to find out that even those who sit on the highest court in the land can still have a great sense of humor and to hear about his humble beginning helped me realize that goals are attainable even when it seems as if all of the odds are stacked up against us. One common theme that existed among all of our speakers was that we are the future and that current politicians are optimistic about the days ahead for our nation because of students like us. This is an incredible gift and accolade that comes with incredible responsibilities for all of us and I feel confident that with my fellow delegates leading the way, the future of our country will be in excellent hands. The Hearst Foundations gave us a once in a lifetime opportunity to see the inner workings of the United States government up close and we will surely take advantage of it in the years to come. What other high school students have the chance to visit CIA headquarters, eat lunch in the diplomatic dining room on the highest floor of the State Department or have a Senate Reception with over 70 senators in attendance?

It is truly amazing that with all of our different cultures, backgrounds, religions, races, and political affiliations, we are a family that can have civil discussions about the most passionate issues of our time and who are always there for each other. When I log onto Facebook after a hard night of studying or a really frustrating day at school, I click on the USSYP 2011 group page and know that I am right at home. I now want to be a part of our government more than ever before and I now know that there are so many opportunities in Washington whether one is an elected official or not. In the future, I hope to be invited to speak at an event of the United States Senate Youth Program and tell the next generation what the past one has told me: the future is an optimistic one because of life changing opportunities none more special or impactful than the United States Senate Youth Program.