

James Hitchcock - IN - 2011

Taking a moment to reflect on my Senate Youth experience in Washington, D.C. calls to mind a wealth of images and memories – some momentary and anecdotal, others longer-lasting, and some that continue to live on each time I log onto Facebook or check a new text. My experience with the United States Senate Youth Program was unforgettable in every sense of the world. I have had the opportunity to make lifelong friends, to listen to unforgettable speakers, to eat some pretty incredible food, and to spend seven days surpassing all expectations in what was unequivocally the most eye-opening week of my life.

In my experience, listening to the speakers the Hearst Foundations scheduled was easily the most illuminating aspect of the program. Hearing from some of the major players in D.C. – from the Director of the C.I.A. to a Supreme Court Justice to the President himself – provided me with a level of insight that I could never have attained short of working on Capitol Hill itself. Like many in the program, I personally found Justice Clarence Thomas's talk to us the most enjoyable. The Justice, surely in part because of his position as an appointed official, was able to be much more frank and open with us, which made his conversation much more enlightening. Furthermore, he presented his thoughts in a manner that was not only informative but also compelling; I found his mix of humor and serious discussion very engrossing especially contrasted to my drier expectations. That said, all speakers gave to us invaluable insight on American government or, in the case of Turkish Ambassador Namik Tan, on international politics. For me personally, Ambassador Tan was also a particularly interesting speaker. I am passionate about foreign affairs, and hearing his speaking about the subject, especially from a non-Western perspective, was extremely gratifying for me.

The experience of being in D.C. and touring the various landmarks so important to national politics was in a different way very exciting for me. I have had the opportunity to visit the capital several times before, but submerging myself in the political atmosphere of Washington was a completely new experience. Seeing Senator John McCain walking in the halls of the Senate or hearing about Bill Gates sightings was exhilarating. I savored every moment of our tours around the city, and altogether they comprised one of those most interesting and unexpectedly fulfilling aspects of the program.

I cannot overstate what a thrilling and overall life-changing time the week in Washington, D.C. was for me. It was in so many ways dream come true – I recall getting goosebumps seeing President Obama, Secretary Duncan, Director Panetta, and many of the other speakers in the flesh. I left the capital at once amazed by having seen and met all the figures we did but also by what an amazing program Senate Youth provides. I will cherish the memories I made that week (and the ones I have forged since) for the rest of my life, and I feel extremely grateful to the Hearst Foundations and all those who work to make it such a fantastic experience for helping me to channel and develop my own personal passion for American politics.