

Michael Hoosier - MO - 2011

In everyone's life there comes a moment that when reflected upon, truly defines them. For some, this moment is more difficult to pinpoint than for others. In my life, my moment is clear. After attending the 2011 United States Senate Youth Program, I can unequivocally declare that the experience of meeting not only the nation's current leaders, but its future titans has reinvigorated my passion for public service, and stirred me onward to greater things.

It all began with a Saturday plane ride from St. Louis to Washington, D.C. During the short trip, I questioned how the week would play out. No amount of dreaming could have prepared me for the lightning fast day ahead. After arriving at the airport, I was escorted along with fellow delegates to busses by military mentors, elite men and women from every branch of the Armed Forces that were selected to inform and protect us during the week. We were taken to the Mayflower Hotel, an incredibly luxurious building where we were served lavishly catered meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I was awed by this grandiosity—the first of many awing moments during the week.

After a night of amazing food and even better introductions, we began Sunday with trips to the Newseum, the Smithsonian American History, and the Smithsonian Art Museum. Monday began the first day of speakers; we kicked it off with a bang. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas spoke to us Senate Youth Delegates for nearly an hour and a half, giving candid prepared remarks for fifteen minutes, and then opening the floor to questions. I had never expected any figure in power to be so open and direct. Justice Thomas was engaging and lighthearted, at one time asking, "Don't YouTube me bro!", and at another employing humor for emphasis, stating that he "liked being black... even before it was cool!" when referring to his experiences in a segregated school system.

The following morning, my fellow Missouri delegate Patricia Okonta and I had the opportunity to provide introduction and appreciation remarks for Nobel Prize-winning Secretary of Energy Steven Chu. We were able to meet the Secretary, take pictures, shake his hand, and speak personally with him. After discussing the specifics of energy policy with my table over breakfast for nearly twenty minutes, the Secretary prepared himself to speak before the entire group. Before he arose, he leaned over and whispered in my ear that his father had taught at Washington University in St. Louis, the school I had told him I would be attending in the fall! That was a moment of connection I will never forget.

If Tuesday was good, Wednesday was better. Not only did I eat lunch in the State Department, or meet movie star and presidential advisor Kal Penn, not only did I get to yell, "Hello Mr. President!" down the hall of the White House as the President of the United States approached our group for a candid meeting, but I was also able to speak personally with both of my Senators at the USSYP Senate Reception Dinner. There, I met my Republican Senator Roy Blunt and my Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill. The moment could not have been planned any better. These senators arrived together to meet us—their constituents—and took the time to take several pictures together. For once, Washington showed some bipartisanship.

Thursday and Friday provided a whirl-wind closing to an amazing week. Leon Panetta, Director of the CIA, urged us to remember to always fight for freedom. He was followed by an incredibly open panel of the Directors of the four divisions of the CIA. The Director for Clandestine Operations observed that, "There's no nice way to say it... we're the good guys, but we steal stuff," while the Director of Science and Technology reveled in the fact that, "If you need something, and no one else can get it...if it's on the highest mountain or beneath the deepest ocean, we build what we need and we steal it!" I definitely felt safer, albeit a little more wary of wire-taps after that. After the intelligence angle, we heard from a Major General at the Pentagon about the current progress of the Army. I was forced to stop and take a moment

to realize that I had literally been to every institution in our country: Executive, Legislative, Judicial Branches, as well as leaders in industry and the military.

After a week of rubbing elbows with the powers that be, it was time to depart for home. I ceased to be a Senate Youth Delegate, and became a Senate Youth Alumnus, joining an elite group of only about 5,000 strong from nearly fifty years of programs. As I reflect upon this experience and give my testimony to the awesome influence it will hold in my life, I can say that there are three reasons why this event has changed me forever.

First, it threw me into an atmosphere of class and luxury that I had never before encountered. It exposed me to meals with more than one fork, knife, and spoon, and made me feel more comfortable exploring new cultures and customs. Secondly, the regular exposure to individuals in power cemented my longing to be a public servant. I realized that this program gave me greater access in a week to leaders in political, business, and military leaders than average citizens have in their entire life. Moreover, we had greater access than some government officials have themselves. It all made me realize how important it is to me that I am able to be involved in those decisions. Finally, the vast variety of friends and relationships USSYP gifted me, with leaders from every state and then some, will not only help me in networking, but provide me with a valuable system of support in troubling times. When all else fails, I am still a 2011 United States Senate Youth Program Alumnus. I am a future President. We are the future leaders, shapers, and makers of tomorrow.