

Megan MacInnes - NH - 2011

I try to avoid clichés. There are very few situations in which the use of a cliché is unavoidable, and yet I find it difficult to discuss my experiences with the United States Senate Youth Program without them. This program was, without a doubt, life-changing. I had always had a deep interest in politics and government, but USSYP gave me a sense that my dreams of being in leadership are not at all outlandish, and in fact are very possible. It is one thing for your friends to joke that you could be the first woman president. It is another thing entirely for a Congressman to tell you that you are here to make history, or for a Supreme Court Justice to say that you give him hope for the future. The star treatment that we received from the Hearst Foundations, from magnificent accommodations to the chance to use multiple forks for one meal, felt like a vote of confidence in what we might accomplish. The military mentors, who gave me a more personal sense of appreciation for our military, were inspiring leaders and an honor to get to know. I cannot begin to thank the Hearst Foundations for giving me the chance to be a part of this program. I have been in leadership programs that assure you that you can make a difference. The United States Senate Youth Program expects that we will make a difference.

It was a privilege to be able to meet and learn from some of the most important difference-makers of our time, from Justice Clarence Thomas to Secretary Chu to President Obama. It was exciting to hear from such a wide variety of speakers – we were not limited to Senators or Congressional politics. The intelligence, passion, and candidness of the speakers gave me an even deeper appreciation for American government and the policy-makers. Most delegates would agree with me that it was a thrill to meet President Obama, especially since it was my eighteenth birthday, and the time spent with Justice Clarence Thomas was one of the major highlights of the week. How many people can say that they heard a Supreme Court Justice say the word “bro?” I also appreciated the speeches from Ambassador Namik Tan and Under Secretary Maria Otero. It was interesting to get an outside view of America from the Ambassador, and a global view from Under Secretary Otero. Ambassador Tan told us that America is unique because it is the only place in the world in which anyone can feel as if he or she belongs, and cautioned us not to lose sight of that trait. Under Secretary Otero echoed the idea that we could make change by reaching out to others, particularly our peers in the Middle East and Asia as the youth become more powerful. It was exciting to have this level of access to and receive this level of honesty from political leaders during a time of change in our country's history.

When people ask me about the trip, most just want to know how close I was able to get to Obama. My response that we did not get invited to the Situation Room generally draws disappointed looks. They cannot understand how this week could have changed my life if I did not even get to hug the President. But I know that what changed my view of the world and altered the course that I will take is, beyond anything, the opportunity I had to meet the other delegates. Not only did I join a network of driven, successful individuals, but I also formed friendships with an incredible group of people. I have no doubt that I will be friends with many of the delegates for the rest of my life. I have a more open mind as a result of my friendships and open conversations with people from all different places, backgrounds, and political persuasions. I was honored to give a keynote speech at the end of the program, and I said that now this is our time. I believe that we are ready to lead, and that the future of our country is looking better because of the passion and enthusiasm of the 2011 United States Senate Youth Program.