

Keanna Cohen - NM - 2011

The United States Senate Youth Program was an unforgettable experience that has been matched by no other. After attending the conference, I noted that it seemed like the New Mexico selection process for the program was one of the longest and most detailed in comparison with the other states. To apply, I first had to fill out an application. The application consisted of standard forms, my high school transcript, letters of recommendation, and finally, an essay. I was then selected as one of twelve students to participate in an interview process that consisted of a one-one-one interview with a panel of judges, a specific, twenty-question US history test, and a debate regarding how prepared the United States was in the case that a national disaster occurs. After this long and arduous process, I was informed that I was one of two students to participate in Washington Week and receive a \$5000 scholarship. Upon reflecting on my experience, I find that I was influenced most by the delegates I met. In addition, Washington Week helped me realize that there is more to the Government than just politics and ultimately reshaped my goals.

Prior to attending Washington Week, I joined the USSYP Facebook group, an incredible asset afforded by the Age of Technology. To be completely honest, upon joining the group, I was incredibly intimidated. It seemed that the majority of the delegates were outspoken with clear opinions on today's world. Their firm grasps on concepts foreign to me encouraged my uneasy feelings. As a result, I began reading news updates on my phone daily and pick up on news highlights during my before-school routine. As the day of departure grew closer, I became increasingly anxious. My heart was split between angst and excitement. What if I wasn't as smart as these kids? What if I had no idea what they were talking about? What if I was stuck in my room by myself for the entire trip? What if I was miserable? My mom always likes to say, "There will always be someone with more than you, and there will always be someone with less than you. Your job is to be grateful for what you have." Unfortunately I have to admit that, once again, my mom was right. Yes, there were delegates who were smarter than I. Yes, there were some that were Ivy-League bound. And yes, there was many a time that I found myself with little to say in a conversation because I had little background knowledge. But none of that mattered. You were not labeled based on your SAT score or GPA. Instead, delegates co-mingled, ultimately discovering the unique environments our peers came from as well as their informed opinions regarding today's society. The most impressive aspect regarding the USSYP group was how quickly everyone fell in to sync. Within hours there were inside jokes, group games, and candid laughter leaking from the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel. Thanks to USSYP, I can now say I have a friend from each state. In addition, I know students that will be attending some of the greatest colleges and universities in the nation. After spending a week with some of the most hard-working and driven students in the United States, I am sure that our great country will continue moving forward.

Many delegates may tell you that Washington Week reassured their goal to ultimately become a senator, working towards a better United States through their work in Congress. However, Washington Week opened my eyes to various other opportunities and prospective careers. Although this comment may be premature, I found myself to be less interested in the elected officials as opposed to the appointed officials. While both were interesting, it seemed that the elected officials tended to tip-toe around our thoughtful and in-depth questions that often put them on the spot. While I understand their caution, I feel that I would not want to be in that situation. On the other hand, those who were in appointed positions such as Director of the CIA Leon Panetta, Secretary of Energy Steven Chu, Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, and finally, Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs Maria Otero, were far more direct. Their answers to our questions were articulate, clear, and concise. They spoke with purpose, knowing that we were eagerly listening and recording every word. In addition, I believe that their expertise is highly valued and that their hard work and in-depth knowledge

significantly influences the decisions of elected officials. In addition, a look behind the scenes at the CIA headquarters greatly altered my future plans. The panel that sat before us knew more about our country's safety than 98% of Americans. Their motives were not driven by lobbyists and their decisions were based on facts. While they could not manage to give us many details, we as delegates realized that the fate of our country was ultimately in the hands of these people. One slip up and a terrible event such as 9/11 can occur. Yet, their many successes must remain secret. This concept is incredible to me and has encouraged me to pursue a career in a similar field, or at least have greater appreciation for people who work in such a delicate discipline.

I could list the influential leaders we met, but you could simply read the program. I could tell you about the three course meals and the numerous utensils we learned to maneuver. I could describe to you the unique energy that embodies Washington D.C., but again, if you are a lover of public service as we delegates are, this is apparent. Instead, I chose to tell you about my journey beginning with the detailed application process, leading to my weekly anxiety, and ending with my ground-breaking realizations and altered goals. Washington Week was unlike any other experience. And, like my fellow delegates, it opened my eyes to new opportunities, ideas, and people. For this, I am truly thankful for this life-altering opportunity that has influenced me beyond what I am able to convey within this brief note.