

Ashley Chen – New Hampshire - 2012

I remember waking up at 3 AM on March 3 with butterflies in my stomach. I had been waiting for this day for four months, ever since I opened up the letter from my state's Department of Education telling me I had been chosen as one of two delegates to represent New Hampshire for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United States Senate Youth Program. I still remember running around my house and screaming with excitement. But that morning on March 3, the excitement turned to a bundle of nerves. What were the other delegates like? What if I didn't understand the political issues they would discuss? Little did I know I had nothing to be nervous about. I was about to embark on a life-changing experience.

Everything I experienced during my week in Washington was incredible. The graciousness of the entire USSYP staff and security, the helpfulness of the military mentors, the gourmet three-course meals, the hotel rooms: all incredible. Meeting both of my state senators? Incredible. Getting to sit in the Supreme Court courtroom? Incredible. Being on C-SPAN? Incredible. Having dinner 20 feet from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution? Absolutely incredible.

Even more incredible were the speakers. Though we heard from a variety of people from Senate Historian Don Ritchie to Chief Justice John G. Roberts, Jr. and even President Barack Obama himself, they all shared important qualities: their love for this country and their dedication to public service. Hearing Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta say that we were going to be the next greatest generation to make a difference was both surreal and empowering.

But the most incredible part of the week was getting the opportunity to meet 103 of the brightest minds in the country. From engaging in political discussions on the bus to hearing about someone's hometown, I learned so much from my fellow delegates that I never would've known if not for this experience. We laughed together, cried together, and learned how to change the world together. I already know I am going to college with a few of them, but our week at USSYP will keep the rest of us connected for the rest of our lives.

Something that really resonated with me from my trip was a quote from NASA Administrator Charles F. Bolden, Jr.: "The world is yours today. Don't let an opportunity to make a difference pass you by." Even if I only talked to a delegate for a few minutes or had multiple dinner discussions with them throughout the week, I know that all 104 of us were in Washington because we are the future leaders of America. I have no doubt that we will put Administrator Bolden's quote to use and make a difference wherever we may end up.

I am forever grateful to the Hearst Foundation and everyone at USSYP who made the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the program possible, especially Rayne Guilford and Lynn DeSmet. It was certainly an experience I will never forget.