

AN EDUCATION IN POLITICS

THE U.S. SENATE YOUTH PROGRAM

by Cesia Flores

I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED POLITICS. I GREW UP IN A FAMILY WHOSE IDEA OF A TELEVISION MARATHON CONSISTED OF WATCHING THE ENTIRE REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTIONS BACK TO BACK, WHOSE TOPIC OF CONVERSATION DURING LONG CAR RIDES WAS USUALLY THE DIFFERENCES IN THE VIEWS OF CANDIDATES, AND WHOSE “POP QUIZZES” ON THE FUNCTIONING OF POLITICAL BRANCHES WERE TAKEN FAR TOO SERIOUSLY BY MY FATHER. IN SUCH AN ENVIRONMENT, POLITICS BECAME NOT ONLY SOMETHING I WAS INTENSELY AWARE OF, BUT ALSO AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF MY IDENTITY.

That’s why I was intrigued when a friend at school told me about the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). Established in 1962 by a U.S. Senate Resolution, this annual program brings two high school juniors or seniors from each state, the District of Columbia, and Department of Defense Dependents Schools to Washington, DC, for a week to observe the U.S. government in action. Sponsored by the Hearst Foundation, the program also provides each delegate with a \$10,000 scholarship. I decided to apply.

I worked diligently on each component of my application, including two essays, a list of extracurricular activities demonstrating an interest in government or civics, and letters of recommendation. When the time came to mail in the application, though, I was filled with insecurity as I imagined the superior qualifications of the other applicants. I was attending a leadership conference in December 2015 when I received a phone call from my mother. Her first words—“You were selected for the Senate program”—filled me with an excitement I recall vividly today. Unfortunately, this level of excitement made the months leading up to the start of the program unbearably long.

Patriots All

When March 5 finally rolled around, it was with great anticipation that I boarded a plane for “Washington Week,” as it’s affectionately known. Upon arriving at the historic Mayflower Hotel, where all 104 USSYP delegates were to stay, I met my fellow delegates. As

I shook the hand of each delegate, I was struck by their kindness and poise. As the week progressed, I would have the opportunity to learn more about their backgrounds and their own reasons for wanting to attend the USSYP.

After about an hour, the president of the USSYP Alumni Association addressed the group. He invoked the spirit of American patriotism when he told us that we were 104 of the best our nation has to offer—words that would continue to resonate with us throughout the week and serve as a reminder of our goals and responsibilities as delegates. We were then introduced to our chaperones, all of whom were members of the U.S. military. My mentor, an Air Force lieutenant, worked in intelligence at an American base in Germany.



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Great Institutions

Throughout the week, we had the opportunity to tour some of Washington's great institutions, including the National Archives, Arlington National Cemetery, the U.S. Capitol, and NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. As a delegate from Texas, I was honored to introduce Dr. Piers Sellers to the rest of the delegates. Beginning with his career at NASA's Johnson Space Flight Center, Dr. Sellers dedicated his entire life to improving our knowledge of outer space. During a reception at the Capitol, my fellow Texas delegate and I had the honor of speaking at length with Texas Senator John Cornyn, who was genuinely curious about our interests. We were thrilled when he said that he would be pleased to have us intern at his office in the future.

As the week went on, the list of government officials and dignitaries we met grew. At the Museum of American Liberty, we heard from German Ambassador to the U.S. Peter Wittig, who talked about his early career, the strength of German-American relations, and the current European migrant crisis. At the Mayflower Hotel, we met U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, who spoke about the value of service and the nature of his work, which involves overseeing the security of U.S. nuclear weapons and promoting nuclear nonproliferation and renewable energy of all types.

Meeting U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was truly a transformational experience for me. When we visited the Supreme Court, "the notorious RBG" described what it was like to be one of only nine women out of 500 in her Harvard Law class. I tried to imagine her incredible journey to becoming someone who today interprets our country's laws in the highest court in the land. Prior to her appointment to the Supreme Court, Justice Ginsburg worked hard to advance women's rights. By pushing the boundaries society had constructed, she became an amazing role model for me and other young women.

Our most anticipated meeting, however, was with President Obama. The President spoke to us about overcoming failure and adversity. He told us that at a very challenging time during his bid for the U.S. Senate, he had almost considered quitting, but luckily decided otherwise. I reflected on his tenacity in overcoming the obstacles he encountered. His relentless attempts to succeed inspired me to be relentless in my own life. Hearing about his personal experiences helped me redefine failure, seeing it not as a setback, but as a lack of perseverance in the face of adversity.

The Experience Continues

Upon returning home from the USSYP, I realized that some of the most impactful experiences I'd had there were those I had taken for granted at the time, including the friendships I built with fellow delegates. I roomed with a delegate from North Dakota, Ali, who shared my "fangirl" attraction to First Ladies Jackie Kennedy and Nancy Reagan. Although Ali and I had different political views, our civil discussions of current issues showed us that it is indeed possible to respectfully disagree.

I also appreciated the interactions I had with our military mentors. Because I had come to the program with little knowledge of the military, it was enlightening to speak with our mentors and learn about their various roles as senior military officers. I began to understand what it's like to put one's life on the line for our nation. I learned about disputes involving gender inequality in the Marines, and differing military perspectives on the use of drones in combat—issues I had never considered before, but which I now think of as important and compelling.

The lessons I learned at USSYP will stay with me for a lifetime. In fact, the USSYP experience fueled my passion for public policy. After hearing about Ruth Bader Ginsburg's experiences in particular, I was inspired to pursue a career in the legal field, which is currently only two percent Hispanic. And when the going gets tough, I'll remember the brave words and deeds of the public servants who have gone before me. ■



Cesia Flores is a senior at the South Texas Business, Education, and Technology Academy, where she is completing the International Baccalaureate program and Technology Track. She is a national TSA officer and president of her school's National Honor Society and Christian Fellowship. She enjoys spending time with her friends, frequenting the gym, and reading both liberal and conservative newspapers.

Learn more about the U.S. Senate Youth Program at ussenateyouth.org.