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The 52nd United States Senate Youth Program was undeniably a once in a lifetime experience, but it was also much more than that. It was a week that united various young, talented, leaders, in hope that the program may help them ensure an even brighter future for our nation by supplying them with knowledge, inspiration, and opportunities to help them in their pursuit of public service. Those aspects, thanks to the speakers, the events, and the people I was fortunate to meet, are ones that I will never forget and will continue to be a part of me as I lead in every aspect of my life, whether in an office or as a citizen.

For starters, the speakers were quite memorable and provided great insight on various topics, including policies, current issues, and the function of their positions. One particular speaker that really stood out to me was Secretary of U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Shaun Donovan. Not only did he provide encouraging words about the next generation of leaders and the future of homelessness in the U.S., but he also disclosed what brought him into his line of work. Having lived in the city environment, he witnessed the effects of homelessness in action and from then on sought to make a difference. In his parting words, he encouraged us to follow our passions that lead us to change the world, and that government is “more than just policy. It’s about the people we serve.” I believe his message was one that followed me around the most as we talked to other leaders, including Justice Scalia, Associate Attorney General Tony West, Secretary of the Senate Nancy Erickson, etc. They all opened my eyes to the areas of government, the people who run them, and the dedication that goes into them.

Other speakers that I found equally enlightening were President Barack Obama and New Hampshire Senators Ayotte and Shaheen. The President, of course, was unique to get to hear from in person. As our nation’s leader, his insights were naturally noteworthy, especially in regards to our relations with the Soviet Union and the power of optimism. Concerning the Senators, I had been looking forward to meeting them ever since I found out that I was selected to take part in the program. I was excited not only because they held important offices and were both great people, but also because they are the ones who represent me and our state. The opportunity to talk to leaders who have such a connection is perhaps unmatched. Both Senators encouraged the pursuit of public service, and both were optimistic about the next generation of leaders. From the perspective of a future leader, such encouragement is always a great thing to have, for as many of the speakers admitted, public service is not always easy.

In addition to hearing from speakers, we went to several locations and took part in some awesome events. At first glance, one may say that these events were meant to solely entertain or be for the benefit of going somewhere exclusive. The reality though is that these locations and events exhibited a much greater value. As I looked upon the spire from the World Trade Center in the Newseum, or as I stood in the midst of the eternal flame at the Kennedy Gravesite, or as I gazed up at the giant Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial, I thought deeply about our national tragedies, their legacies, and the hope that was secured by our leaders in our darkest times. It was inspiring, to say the least. In a similar way, watching the wreath be laid at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, or walking through the series of benches at the Pentagon in memory of those who died on 9/11, or even eating dinner in the National Archives in the proximity of our nation’s founding documents, I looked back on our nation’s sacrifices and all that was gained from them. Going to these places reenacted the song, the spirit, of our nation, which sounded even before its founding and continues to resonate every day as the U.S. continues to prosper. Moreover, that spirit, I believe, should be heard by everyone who seeks to lead in the great nation known as the United States.

Lastly, the delegates, military mentors, staff, and alumni also played a major role in my enjoyment, understanding, and learning opportunities during the program. As stated before, we delegates were united by our desire to take part in public service. Even so, we had various differences in regards to environments, politics, religion, education, foreign policy, career plans, etc. Those differences made every conversation deep, memorable, and enlightening. Never before have I met so many diverse people who also exhibited so many common interests as I in one place. I cannot imagine what the program would have been like without these interactions, for they played such a big part in my day to day life during the week. Furthermore, the military mentors were also an aspect I could not imagine being without during the program. They were highly skilled, caring, wise, and deserving of respect for their dedication, sacrifice, and service. Like the delegates I befriended that week, I won't easily forget them and all that I learned from them. Concerning the staff and program alumni, I was fortunate to get to talk to most of them, for not very many delegates did. They had worked hard to put this program together and they were a pleasure to talk to, including the coordinators, protective service agents, and the program photographer. I learned a lot about college and career paths, which I did not get the chance to learn about elsewhere. I hope that they will continue their hard work for the future participants in the program.

In conclusion, it was a remarkable week. Returning home wasn't easy, especially when I knew that few people would truly understand the magnitude that this program had done for me. I learned and experienced so much, and upon its close I realized one of the greatest lessons that I learned that week, one that I continue to share with the world. That lesson is that no matter who you are, or what your role in society may be, we all have the power to take part in public service and be the positive change we want to see in the world. And for those who seek to do so, be prepared to lead the ones who support you and those who look up to you. The world is full of leaders and followers, fortunate and unfortunate, and together I know that we can make a difference, restore hope, and be a beacon as we dive into the depths of our nation's future.