

## Joseph Bergeon, ME – 2019

The 57th annual United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) in Washington, D.C. was an experience that greatly benefitted me as a student leader and as a citizen of this country. Not only did the USSYP foster principles of leadership in each of the one hundred and four delegates, but the program also drew these delegates together in appreciation of our unique responsibilities and blessings as American citizens. Those lessons in citizenship were the most memorable parts of the program for me, and I will take those lessons with me for the rest of my life.

The week itself, with incredible opportunities to hear from and ask questions of various officials of the federal government, taught me how our institutions function with the various beliefs and principles of their individual members. To see the political offices held by President Trump, Senators Ernst and Blumenthal, and Secretary Pompeo, balanced with the civil and military service-oriented offices held by FEMA Associate Administrator Kamoie, National Intelligence Principal Deputy Director Gordon, and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Paul Selva was fascinating for all the delegates. I was particularly struck by the words of those civil and military service members as they visited with us throughout the week. Associate Administrator Kamoie gave us three pieces of advice: to commit to service, to think big, and to take bold action. Principal Deputy Director Gordon challenged us to think about how all Americans can contribute to keeping the nation safe and secure from narcotics trafficking and terrorism. General Selva taught us that persisting throughout one's career can lead to success and a position of making a real difference on behalf of the American people. All of them have served the people of this country throughout their adult lives, and I know that they won my admiration and respect.

The most important part of the 2019 Washington Week for me, however, was the building of relationships with the other delegates and our seventeen excellent Military Mentors. Here, I'd like to focus specifically on my mentor, Major Dillon Fishman of the United States Marine Corps. In that one week, Major Fishman taught me more about service and honor than any one individual had in my life before. His story, along with the stories of each of the other sixteen Military Mentors, deeply resonated with me; never before have I spent that amount of time with officers, and it was a completely new world of service and sacrifice that gives me hope and pride in my citizenship.

Finally, and most importantly, the other one hundred and three delegates that convened in Washington from across the country were the most valuable part of the experience. The friendships I now have with many of these fellow delegates are the most enriching result of the program, and the result for which I am most grateful. Prior to Washington Week, I failed to read the delegate roster, which left me with some surprise; as I walked in on the first Saturday, I realized that I already knew about a dozen of them from prior activities. That feeling would soon shift, as by the end of the week I had spoken and formed relationships with nearly all of them. It was comforting to know that there are many more like me across the country, even if students like us are few and far between in my small community in Maine; all of us were there because we believe in service to others, which is the paramount spirit of the one hundred and four.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the United States Senate and to the Hearst Foundations for the opportunity to be a delegate to the 57th United States Senate Youth Program, something I will never forget. I'm candid when I write that at no other time in my life was I so inspired to serve my fellow citizens and appreciative of the blessings of American citizenship. I have the utmost faith that the guiding principles of education, leadership, and public service will be demonstrated by these delegates for years to come.