

Maren Fagan, AL – 2022

As a student journalist, I often find myself with questions. These questions involve a wide array of topics to include a multitude of perspectives. With my interest in social change and current events, I often question the role of the government and the citizen's position in our society. The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) provided me the chance to gain multiple different perspectives on my questions through speakers like Dr. Betty Koed, Justice Anthony Kennedy, Ms. Vanita Gupta, the Suez Canal interactive diplomacy simulation, and, most importantly, through my discussions with my fellow delegates.

Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed shared three separate stories that impacted me. Each story she told highlighted our government's changes over the years, especially ones that told us never to give up. Once the stories were over, we entered the question-and-answer portion of the event. One of my fellow delegates asked about the filibuster and its current controversy. Dr. Koed responded by saying the rules of the Senate are not inherently wrong, but it is the people who misuse those privileges that result in wrongdoings. This take on the Senate changed how I view this practice, as I previously did not consider the people using the rules to a specific advantage, just the rule itself. I believe this added perspective demonstrates the importance of being open to many different approaches to understanding current controversies. With history as my favorite subject in school, words cannot express how thankful I am to have had Dr. Koed speak with us and share the importance of looking at the past to understand the present and envision the future.

Meeting with and learning from former Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court Anthony Kennedy was an opportunity that I could not have imagined was it not for the USSYP. Justice Kennedy joined the delegates quoting the preamble, which he identifies as one of the most critical components of the Constitution. He helped me see that the fifty-two opening words of the preamble are more significant to the understanding of America than I initially understood. Justice Kennedy also used his time with me and the other delegates to speak with us about our thoughts on the Constitution and how it impacts our daily lives. Having a member of the Supreme Court make time to converse with teenagers on important issues highlighted the significance of listening to and learning from every different perspective available, no matter how old someone is or where they may be from. I have the deepest gratitude for Justice Kennedy, and I know that I will never look at the Constitution of the United States the same again.

Furthermore, Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta reinforced my view of social change and youth participation with her responses to my and my fellow delegates' questions. Ms. Gupta reminded us that youth are the "engine of change," and this comment is a refreshing opinion on how teenagers, like my fellow delegates and me, can and should contribute to modern society. As teenagers, people in powerful positions often tell us to let the adults handle situations. Ms. Gupta's comments empowered me to understand that people must stand up for what is right, no matter their age. Hearing this perspective from a civil and human rights lawyer, my aspiring profession, furthered my hope to enact change in my community and beyond. I know that Ms. Gupta's support of me and the other delegates motivates us to make the world a more equitable place.

The Suez Canal Crisis interactive diplomacy simulation put on by the American Museum of Diplomacy was one of my favorite parts of Washington Week. I love participating in Model United Nations at school, so I was excited to enter the simulation during USSYP and take

another country's perspective while negotiating for a peaceful outcome. Throughout the simulation, the delegates in my group and I looked for ways to solve the issues instead of fighting about them by using fair debates and discourse rather than rude and unbacked conversations. While every delegate represented a stakeholder nation, everyone brought different ways to communicate and discuss how to solve world events by molding their personal ideologies with the country they represented. The importance of this diplomatic simulation combining different ideologies could not have been more timely, given the significant world events occurring simultaneously as Washington Week. I am so appreciative to have met with the other delegates to learn how to use diplomacy to solve global problems.

USSYP opened my mind to a variety of new perspectives. Dr. Koed, Justice Kennedy, Ms. Gupta, and the diplomacy simulation were important in confirming my beliefs with additional views and changing ones I thought would never falter. Additionally, during Washington Week, all of the other delegates made me feel incredibly welcome and accepted into the national program. I am so thankful to have met the amazing group of students from all over the country and world who accepted me as a friend and spoke with me about their dreams for the future. As a teenager from the deep South, new perspectives opened my eyes and answered so many of the questions I had before the program. I am so grateful to have joined the hundred and three other students, and I would like to thank the staff of USSYP for putting on this amazing program.