

Sarayu Bethamcherla, MI — 2022

It's undeniable the role the U.S. Senate Youth Program and the Hearst Foundations have had on over 6,000 delegates prior to my class and myself; the 60th annual Washington Week did not fail to meet this precedent. The level of increasing polarization apparent in our country is left to be a burden for young people, and this week served as a transformative journey in comprehending the responsibility of my generation in addition to the true state of the behind-the-scenes work in government. More broadly, as General Mark A. Milley put it, the greatest threat to American democracy is internal indecisiveness and the inability to develop compromise; consequently, young people need to be involved in government more than ever. The personal and collective growth endured through the course of one week is genuinely unequivocal.

My first time unmuted during a session was with our first scheduled speaker: former Senator Cory Gardner. It's not hyperbole to state that my heart had never beat so fast, knowing the caliber of the question I sought to ask. When Major Steve Cox began to introduce me as "the delegate from Michigan," I gathered my composure and inquired about the hypocrisy of a previous co-sponsorship of a bill that contradicted his current position, which felt indescribably stimulating to ask. I had garnered respect and an influx of praise from my delegates, providing a taste of the community I was now a part of. Hearing my home Senator, Senator Debbie Stabenow, say she was proud of me, NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General Carmen Romero offer a glimpse of hope in relation to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, and Secretary Pete Buttigieg reminisce on attaining his first suit for USSYP was nothing short of an honor.

Moreover, it only made sense that Washington Week intertwined with National Woman's Day. The feeling of empowerment from not only the delegates but our female speakers has not shaken. Dr. Betty Koed recounted three stories underscoring that individuals matter and lasting change is incremental. FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel responded to my question regarding the growing reliance on crowdsourced communication in conjunction with the private sector with poise and holistic awareness. UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield shared the experience of failing to balance and navigating through stress to see humanity. Most notably, Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta showcased the fulfillment I aspire to pursue in my future career as an Indian woman in human rights law.

My whole life I've been labeled a proud history nerd or a teenager stuck in the body of a middle-aged politician. U.S. Senate Youth Program is more than just two students from each state—we are endless connections of well-spoken student leaders motivated by the prospect of institutional change with shared experiences of being labeled a history nerd or middle-aged politicians. I've never met so many people who are truly devoted and engaged to better the current state of politics (and whose favorite show is similarly Parks and Recreation). While every speaker was incredibly profound in their own right, it's the connection with my delegates that I walk away with as the most significant aspect of the program. Particularly conversations with my military mentor group, the Imagineers led by Major Pellegrine, regarding systematic applications of educational equity and approaching social issues on the basis of humanity amplified existing passions of mine. Feeling simultaneously validated and challenged to grow my mindset was pivotal in reaffirming a career in public service. The daily Snapchat texts to this day are simply evidence of the relationships that outlive the experiences contained in one week. Undoubtedly, I have met our present organizers but also our future politicians, diplomats, and changemakers. What's more beautiful is there will never be a time in which I'm not within driving distance of a fellow delegate for a coffee date to discuss how we can strive for a perfect union.

At the beginning of the week, our program director Ms. Rayne Guilford told us, “USSYP runs the world.” I can remember the slight confusion from my fellow delegates and myself—in puzzlement at how a single network could have significant influence over D.C., let alone the world. Indebtedness only begins to capture the gratitude I possess for an immersive week of roleplaying as diplomats of the Suez Crisis, meeting alumni (and Jenn Psaki) in the White House, and meaningfully debating with delegates, who I have the privilege of calling friends. But I get it now—USSYP runs the world.