

Danika Grieser, PA – 2022

Despite there being nearly eight billion people in the world, it is still difficult to find just one person that matches you and truly makes you feel as if you belong alongside them. However, the United States Senate Youth Program has helped me find 103. Our drive, passion, and commitment to others are consistent characteristics that I witness in all of my fellow peers and characteristics that inspire me to strive for the best possible future. Personally, the best part of Washington Week wasn't the incredibly insightful speakers or even the chocolate Capitol Buildings, but instead, it was the relationships that blossomed between me and my fellow peers.

We all may be physically disconnected, but the political conversations or the simple inside jokes we created made us all feel as if we were together. From complex observations about our education system to just simply joking about the "correct" way to cut a bagel (MO will always be wrong), thousands of miles that separated the Watje Warriors group from Alaska to Japan didn't put a dent in our connections. As we sat within our military mentor groups each night, we enabled each other to reflect on days that included listening to a former Supreme Court Justice or the nation's highest-ranking military officer – days that I could not have ever previously imagined. Our dedication to each other and the program prompted us to not only listen to the speakers but to truly apply their lessons to our lives as well.

With a strong military background, I have always known of General Milley and his astounding character, yet it was a surreal experience to go beyond just reading articles about what he has said to truly be listening to what he is saying. As he most likely came from some of the most influential meetings of our current times regarding Ukraine, I didn't expect his responses to our questions to be detailed. However, as much of Washington Week also did, I was continuously impressed by the sincerity he had when talking with us. He took the time to ask some of us are future plans, and, to me, that meant that he truly cared. Chosen to represent our state or districts out of millions of other students, we, as delegates, were meant to be together because we will cause powerful change in some capacity or another, and even the U.S.'s Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff recognizes this.

Following our meeting with General Milley, the concept that we, as future leaders of the world, have the ability and capacity to bring about a better country was reinforced by Major General David Isaacson. Throughout his discussion with us, he repeatedly addressed that our public service doesn't have to mimic his where he puts on a camo suit each morning to protect our democracy; instead, our public service, as affirmed by him, can be found in many facets of life. Sometimes, we forget our commitment to others is not just one linear path, but Major General David Isaacson reminded us that it is much more diverse.

Although this topic was not specifically addressed by any speakers, a consistent theme of striving for both accuracy and truth was starkly apparent. Both Ms. Carmen Romero and Secretary Buttigieg described how easily words and statements can be misconstrued to fit a certain narrative. Applying this message to our lives, we cannot take items at face value because it is our responsibility as future leaders to be informed and not to be swayed by misinformed beliefs. It is our responsibility to guide others toward the truth and towards a better future.

Surrounded by such a strong, determined, and influential group of delegates, I am reminded of the potential that our country has, but only if we want it and only if we are willing to be committed to it. As reinforced by speakers throughout the United States Senate Youth Program, our democracy is what protects each and every one of us, so it should and must be coveted by not only us, but also by those with who we share our experience of a lifetime.