

Elizabeth Djajalie, AK – 2024

WASHINGTON – As Alaska Airlines flight 2 descended into the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, I felt the anticipation for the week ahead build inside me. Yes, I was now four hours ahead of my home time zone, but it felt as if I had been flown backward in history. Here was the city of inaugurations, memorials, and cherry blossoms, of State of the Union addresses, galleries, and court rulings. The 2024 United States Senate Youth Program was my first time in Washington, D.C. Before then, Capitol Hill, the Supreme Court, Arlington National Cemetery, and the White House were juggernauts to be pored over on the New York Times or Wall Street Journal pages. Washington Week would forever change my perception and understanding of our nation's capital, government, and the people we choose to lead us.

“The further away I got from home, the more I realized how important it was to be from somewhere.” My ballpoint pen slid across the ivory page, trying valiantly to capture the depth of Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg's words. Yet, no shade of ink could record the tones of sincerity, care, and nostalgia present in the secretary's voice that morning. That remains in my memory. I will always recall the moment Secretary Buttigieg walked into the ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel. I can still hear the sound of one hundred and four delegates standing up in unison, a show of respect for our distinguished guest. The secretary's knowledge of his job was unparalleled of course, but what struck me most was his humanity. When he spoke about his experiences of serving in the armed forces, of leaving home for the first time, of balancing work and love – those stories made me realize that the legends that lead us are, at the core, deeply human. Like us, they are from somewhere. Like us, they go home to someone who reminds them of the people their service impacts every day.

Light streamed through the tall windows of the Kennedy Caucus Room. A minute ago, my fellow delegates and I had walked through the white halls of the Russell Senate Office Building, surreptitiously glancing into the offices with open doors, windows into the daily workings of our government. Our speakers arrived, and the room rose as one to greet Secretary of the U.S. Senate Sonceria Ann Berry and U.S. Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough. More than the light coming in through the windows, the most illuminating part of my time in that room was when a fellow delegate asked our speakers about their experiences during the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol. Bravery and determination blended in the Parliamentarian's voice as she described the vandalized offices, the fear, but also the heroism of her and her staff who saved the presidential election ballots from the rioters. Her story and the work she does each day is a reminder of the dedication to democracy I strive to apply to my own service now and in the future.

“Spend time with people who fill the gaps within yourself,” said Associate Justice Elena Kagan. What I remembered most upon entering the Supreme Court was the red: the red in the ceiling, the red in the drapery on the walls behind where the nine justices sat, the red in the carpet. What I remembered most walking out of the Supreme Court was not the color but the people I was surrounded by. Between the one hundred and four of us, there were advocates of educational equality, equal access to voting, and broad issues on either side of the aisle. During my week in Washington, I met people with views I both agreed with and disagreed with, but common among all the delegates I conversed with was a willingness and eagerness to engage in meaningful dialogue. Each of the one hundred and three delegates I shared Washington Week with has left an indelible mark on me and given me a conviction that our country is in good hands. These are the people that fill the gaps within myself, and I look forward to spending time with them for years and decades to come.