

Emi Sakamoto, CA – 2024

“Welcome to Washington. We need you.”

The raw urgency and sage confidence which defined Brian Kamoie’s opening remarks were electrifying. By imparting two lessons, he propelled us into the most pivotal week of our lives.

The first lesson: “Welcome to Washington.”

On the basis of race, sex, age, or intersectionality, we are not always welcomed into the room where it happens. So, when 104 sixteen and seventeen-year-olds from across the country were invited into the Department of Justice, the Supreme Court, and the White House, we grappled with the gravity of each step we took. Invited into the very rooms that our predecessors were once denied, we were left to ask: “Why us?” We were compelled to critically interrogate our responsibility as citizens and public servants. We were called upon to ask why we were there and what it is that we were there to do.

More importantly, we were endowed with the responsibility to, as Secretary of State Antony Blinken asserted, “Reach back for others to come with us.” We were not the first to be welcomed into these rooms, and we would not be the last. Our greatest responsibility is reciprocity: to return our good fortunes to our communities. After all, as Senator Cortez Masto remarked, “If you got somewhere, you did not get there yourself.”

I would be dishonest if I said that I walked through those doors in pure ecstasy. In the deafening silence that defined the moments before meeting Justice Elena Kagan, I remember grazing my hands along the cold marble that decorated the halls of the Supreme Court. In this moment, a flurry of panic clenched my chest as I began to sway under the weight of this responsibility. Being in such an esteemed space reminded me of the immense burden that public servants, like Justice Kagan, routinely reckon with. I wondered how I could possibly pursue a career with such consequence.

But just as quickly as that fear proliferated within me, a glance at my cohort supplanted those feelings with a more powerful force. The spark in their eyes said it all — the unequivocal zeal that radiated amongst us was as palpable as the gravity of our experience. It was then that I realized: this weight fell upon *all* of our shoulders. What is too heavy for me, is compensated by our collective capacity to carry it together. And this is a weight that we are all willing to carry.

This brings me to Mr. Kamoie’s second lesson: “We need you.”

Not only do we belong, but we are *necessary*. On one hand, being needed is a burden. Paradoxically, embracing the opportunity to shape the landscape of Democracy is the honor of a lifetime. This duality must not be shied away from. It should be celebrated. And the only guarantee is that it will not be easy. But perhaps that is what makes it worth it.

In speaking from his experiences as the Managing Director of the Security Council, Mr. Kamoie put into words the harmony that strummed the chords of our hearts and minds throughout Washington Week. Our hearts were beating to the warm embrace of belonging, and our minds were energized by our responsibility to inspire and enact change.

He also made it clear: the state of our nation has faced and will continue to face crisis after crisis. But he also made it clear that we would and should not be defined by it. So long as the forest fires give birth to an engagement with innovation and a commitment to public service, we have hope. In the words of President Joe Biden, “We’ve got a chance, so don’t give up hope.”

Hope we will, Mr. President. And we will turn that hope into reality.