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Dela-where?

As a delegate from the small (read: mighty) state of Delaware, I'm often asked where I'm from. While I give the typical response of living halfway between Washington, D.C. and New York City, I can't help but admit that it's unsettling to define my state's existence in relation to two cities. Although Washington Week hasn't changed the size (or perceived significance) of Delaware, it is an experience which changed my outlook, and the way I view public service as a conduit to create change in my own community.

Within my own community, I am passionate about environmentalism, and was ecstatic when we got to meet NOAA Administrator, Dr. Richard Spinrad. As he talked about the journey he took to his current role as NOAA's Administrator, he mentioned his extensive background in research. As I was especially interested, I asked a question about the translation between science and policy. His answer was succinct, noting that the best way for scientists to communicate ideas to policymakers is to tie their research to long-term, public-facing impacts. I appreciated this insight, as I see the intersection of science and policy as a powerful tool to make progress on climate issues.

As a passionate public forum debater, the U.S. Senate Youth Program also instilled in me new perspectives, which I was eager to connect with my own cases and rounds from back home. At the State Department, we got to participate in a roundtable simulation, addressing an international migration crisis. I felt right at home, whether it was giving rebuttals to speeches, or weighing the pros and cons of each aid package brought to the table. At the Pentagon, we also got to hear from Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Melissa Dalton. She talked about her role in policy for defense applications, specifically mentioning no-first-use policies—reminiscent of my very first public forum debate resolution.

While solving a migration crisis and discussing defense policy was intense, getting to meet Secretary Antony Blinken—who I've quoted countless times in debate rounds—was a highlight. As he discussed the importance of diplomacy, I gained a greater appreciation for the unique role the United States plays in world affairs, as a mediator and guide for other countries looking to pursue democracy. Amidst today's tumultuous current events, Secretary Blinken's remarks provided hope, and assured me that considering all viewpoints is the most efficient way to solve disputes.

Although disputes between countries are common, disputes within Congress are front and center as well, broadcast throughout the country on various platforms. However, contrary to the media, one of the most significant revelations during my experience at the U.S. Senate Youth Program, was the omnipresence of bipartisanship within the Senate and House of Representatives. During the Senate Reception, for example, my home Senator, Senator Chris Coons, discussed the importance of bipartisanship on several committees he served on, before fist-bumping another Senator from across the aisle. This simple gesture warmed my heart, helping me realize that political polarization is only as harsh as we make it. I noticed a similar theme during our chat with Associate Justice Elena Kagan, as she recounted the laughs and friendships she's shared with Justices on the other side of the theoretical aisle. This represents one of my most treasured realizations from the Senate Youth Program—the existence of a friendly middle ground.

It was as though our delegate class mirrored the convivial nature I discovered in Washington. From the day we found out about our status as delegates to today, I am proud to report that the Senate

Youth chat has not gone a single day without a message (a bad omen for gridlock in the future). We shared many memorable moments, among them a magical night at the White House, watching the “Super Bowl” of politics. But our night got even more exciting, as we met President Biden. Although it was 12:30 am, his excitement and energy was invigorating, as he described the ups and downs of his political journey. His story was extra special for me, as President Biden started his political career on the County Council—in my home county.

Although I live only two hours from Washington, D.C., on the night of our departure, I was compelled to stay up. I wanted to spend as much time as possible with my new friends and Military Mentor, Major Tran, before we headed our separate ways. As I exchanged my last goodbyes with my fellow delegates, I realized the warmth of our camaraderie, and am excited to continue cheering my fellow delegates on, every step of the way.

As part of the U.S. Senate Youth Program, I gained a greater understanding of the processes in place to create change, but also the fierce passion with which our elected (and unelected) officials pursue positive change in our communities, on a federal, state, and local level.

Secretary of Transportation (and USSYP alumni) Pete Buttigieg, put my sentiments succinctly:

“The further I got from home, the more important it was that I was from somewhere.”