

Viveka Mehrotra, GA – 2024

Early on during Washington Week, Brian Kamoie (Managing Director, Deloitte; USSYP—PA 1989) asked the assembled delegates of the 62nd USSYP class, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” It’s a question I’d been seeking the answer to for as long as I could remember.

I finally found my answer on the last day of Washington Week.

On that day, as the delegate coaches headed to Arlington Cemetery, the buzz in my head quietened, and I sensed that I was on the precipice of self-discovery yet again. My thoughts returned to my first time visiting Arlington two years ago which, looking back, set in motion my pledge to be more civically engaged. This time, as a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program, I was sharing the experience with 103 of the brightest, kindest, most capable student leaders drawn from various corners of our nation. Representing every state, D.C., and the Department of Defense, these kids, brimming with hope, energy, and the determination to make a difference, were the best of the best. Handpicked. As were our outstanding Military Mentors: 17 officers nominated and chosen for their exceptional leadership skills to serve as role models and guides during Washington Week.

I, unequivocally, admired them - these mentors, with their unshakable confidence, seemingly resolute demeanor, and unruffled composure. However, it was during the coach ride to Arlington Cemetery that their facade began to crack, revealing a vulnerability I hadn’t anticipated. Before we alighted, standing at the helm of the coach, commanding our attention, Captain McGurkin instructed us to write down one sentence in the front cover of our journals: “It’s not about me.” He urged us to remember this week, if anything, as a time to repay the debt to the generations of Americans who came before us.

Throughout Washington Week, I was privileged to be addressed by luminaries and visionaries in public and private office: esteemed figures such as Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q Brown, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg (USSYP—IN 2000), and Senior Correspondent PBS NewsHour Judy Woodruff, to name just a few. These encounters proved invaluable, enriching my understanding of leadership and government, and fortifying my commitment to a career devoted to public service. From Sec. Buttigieg I learned that “a critical part of democracy is taking care of the basics”, and from Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Melissa Dalton I learned to “know your brief and build coalitions”. When Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) elaborated on how your “greatest strength can be your greatest weakness”, my epiphanic takeaway was that while there may be some things that polarize us as a nation, love of country should never be called into question. Among all these great lessons and truths, the most sobering of all was: “It’s not about me.”

As I look back on Washington Week, my visit to Arlington Cemetery stands out as the defining experience connecting me with who I want to be and, most importantly, remapping my understanding of the legacy I hope to leave behind. Captain McGurkin’s concept of “eulogy builders”—the qualities that define one’s sense of character, attitude, love, and kindness—struck a chord within me and will forever shape my actions. As I strive to cultivate these eulogy builders, guided by the humanity I witnessed in the leaders of our nation and the camaraderie forged with my fellow delegates, I am confident that my legacy as a United States Senate Youth Program delegate will be a testament to the enduring values that define all who are fortunate enough to participate in and grow from this esteemed program—a legacy shaped by Arlington’s solemn grounds and the bonds of kinship forged within its shadows.