

Ahryanna McGuirk, HI – 2024

I write this essay from my home on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, far removed from the neoclassical architecture, famous figures, and iconic monuments of Washington, D.C. Here, there is no expectation to rise with the sun, no established orator encouraging me to change the world, not even a co-delegate to reminisce with. Yet, the memory of the United States Youth Program is present all around me. Everywhere I stop and pay attention, I recognize the manifestations of concerns and teachings imparted at the nation's capital. And I know that what I learned at the United States Senate Youth Program will forever be relevant.

I arrived in Washington, D.C. in the late afternoon of March 1. The lengthy journey left my co-delegate and I desperate for sleep, but the moment we stepped out of the airport, our exhaustion was forgotten as we were greeted by the exuberant staff. When we got to the hotel - the first to arrive - we were greeted by some of the friendliest people I've ever met. Despite just arriving in D.C., their kindness and warmth made me feel at home. I cannot overstate my appreciation for the staff's care and thoughtfulness for our experience and well-being throughout the week.

From fainting in George Washington's study to shaking hands with the president of the United States, my week in the nation's capital was filled with firsts. My favorite event was watching the State of the Union in the White House while eating popcorn with my 103 new friends. While every speaker offered a valuable shred of wisdom, the opportunity to share every experience with peers who were similarly motivated to tackle America's most complex issues was empowering and inspiring. One aspect of the week that words would fail to capture is the electricity that crackled in the atmosphere. I can only describe it as the energy of hope. With every reflective speech, intellectual inquiry, and passionate discussion, I upheld my belief that although our country faces many challenges, we also face a promising present and future, so long as we are brave enough to pursue public service. In the wise words of military mentor Captain Daniel McGurkin, "We are not indebted for the things that have been done for us. We are indebted for all the opportunities we have that others did not have the opportunity to do."

Only two delegates are selected annually from each state to attend the U.S. Senate Youth Program. I recognize the blessing and privilege I was granted to represent Hawai'i in the 62nd annual Washinton Week. Now, it is my responsibility to apply what I learned to make our local and national community a better place. As I go forth in my one wild and precious life, I will hold the lessons I learned in Washington, D.C. and the bonds I had the privilege to cultivate with young leaders across America close to my heart. Though I may be from a tiny island, I am for our entire country. And the time to prove that is now.