

Layla Kelly, IN - 2024

The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) nurtures visionaries in a uniquely beautiful way. I realized the true extent of USSYP's impact on Monday morning of Washington Week, eating breakfast beside Secretary Pete Buttigieg. Only 24 years earlier, he had been sitting in my seat, as a delegate, and now, he spoke to us as a member of the presidential Cabinet, as he dedicates each day to improving the daily lives of Americans across the nation. This set the tone for the remainder of the week because I was reminded of the immense honor of serving as a delegate, and the duty I feel to use my time in Washington to propel me towards a life of serving others, following the example set by Secretary Buttigieg.

Dinner in the rotunda of the National Archives was an experience that I'll undoubtedly remember for the rest of my life. Dining in the presence of our nation's founding documents provided a critical reminder of my "why" in politics: each elected official takes an oath to uphold the Constitution. In a time of heightened polarization, this duty to the Constitution should be ever more important in guiding leaders to make progress and fulfill their commitment to the people of our nation. The conversations that reverberated through the rotunda during dinner reinforced my optimism for the unifying power of our Constitution and this oath; just as throughout the week, I had conversations with delegates from all across the political spectrum, but each was marked by a desire to listen and learn from one another to ultimately make the United States better together.

Watching President Biden's State of the Union address in the East Room of the White House was the apex of the week. Nearly six full days in D.C. culminated in an electric energy that radiated throughout the room. Listening to the leader of the free world while sitting in his home with 103 of the country's young leaders, I felt inspired like never before. We rose to applaud intermittently, reflecting our hope in President Biden's promises and our desire to join him in making progress. I am confident that my generation, especially my fellow delegates, will pick up right where our predecessors left off in an unrelenting push for change. There was a palpable sense of patriotism that night—I realized that my pride in America will always push me towards service to improve it. Washington Week taught me that public service is not a singular profession, but a conviction of one's heart.

When President Biden actually spoke with us after his address, I felt a strange pang of surprise. He was strikingly human. Before my time in Washington, I often doubted my ability to succeed in politics because I naively believed that there was something inherently ethereal about our leaders: they were born to lead, given just the right combination of genetics. Washington Week overwhelmingly challenged this notion. Every speaker was raw and relatable. I appreciated when Elizabeth MacDonough spoke candidly about her struggles to maintain work-life balance because she dispelled my illusion that people in government somehow have everything figured out perfectly. My time at USSYP prompted the powerful realization that trusting myself and my desire to better our nation will guide me well in becoming a force for good, in spite of my weaknesses and imperfections.

I was privileged to learn from America's most prominent leaders, but the most impactful pillar of the USSYP experience was learning from my fellow delegates. Hailing from every corner of the nation, and even the world, my delegation as a whole formed a beautiful patchwork of different lived experiences and resulting perspectives, stitched together with a potent hope for the future. Never before have I found a community of such vibrant and talented individuals. Hearing stories about each person's impact on their own respective communities, driven by their passion, gave me hope for our

nation's future. I consider it a distinct honor to call these people my friends. I was particularly struck by how everyone was authentically happy for the successes of every other delegate; there was no competitive culture, only encouragement and support. These friendships are not confined to the Mayflower— in the weeks since D.C., we've grown even closer, only connecting now over late-night FaceTime calls instead of breakfast in the ballroom. Our experience in D.C. forged an unbreakable bond, and it is fortified as we all continue our separate journeys to collectively create a better tomorrow.

The community of USSYP would be incomplete without the incredible Military Mentor team. Lt. Kate Krolicki, my Military Mentor, was a shining light of my Washington Week experience. I can only hope to serve our country with a heart as dedicated to service as hers. Moreover, her genuine kindness and warmth made D.C. feel like home. As a former delegate herself, Lt. Krolicki understood it all, from stresses of senior year to USSYP traditions, offering much appreciated wisdom at every turn. During our visit to the Department of Justice, I found out that I was accepted into one of my "dream schools," and Lt. Krolicki was the first to hug me in celebration, crying happy tears with me. Truly, I was honored to meet each and every member of the Military Mentor team, all kind and quick to offer words of wisdom garnered from their remarkable successes in service to our country.

Representative Emanuel Cleaver's hopeful words remain at the forefront of my mind: "I hope you get infected with the disease called politics." In my heart, I know that I already have been. As I peer ahead into my future, my plans are molded by his hopes, made ever more true by the contagious love for public service that I witnessed during this remarkable week I was privileged to spend in Washington.