

Claire Ouellette, ME – 2024

“The journey is in the choices you make, large and small.” Ann Berry - USSYP 2024. The small choice I made to file an initial state application for the United States Senate Youth Program has made an everlasting impression on my journey as a student, leader, and U.S. citizen.

The seven days spent with delegates from around the country (and the world), changed my outlook on not only the future of my own life, but the future of this country. Day after day I was met with new inspiration from my peers, their undying passion for service and dedication to the public good matching my own. The United States Senate Youth Program allows for leaders within their own communities to not only *feel* seen, but to create real ideas for implementing change in collaboration with one another. It is a means of connecting with like-minded individuals in a setting of near endless opportunity. As a member of a rural community in Northern Maine, I seldom encounter youth with a zeal for public service like that of my fellow USSYP delegates. To be surrounded by unbridled passion and commitment was an experience that will stay with me for the remainder of my life.

Most are lucky to experience just one, or a few of the events we did over the course of Washington Week. The delegates of USSYP; however, were treated to dozens of once in a lifetime opportunities every single day. With each speaker we heard from, each sight we saw, and experience we partook in, we were filled to the brim with new knowledge that will propel us to a future in which our leaders are educated, compassionate, and reinvigorated to serve. The conversations between fellow delegates are among these incredibly valuable experiences. The future leaders of America congregating in such a fashion prompts discussion unlike any I've ever had before. Polarization of the political landscape was a recurring theme of the week, and although it has previously been a point of contention in my own life, I now have genuine hope for this generation's ability to be the one's to move past it. If for no reason other than the genuine desire to connect with one another as human beings beyond the level of policy and opinion. This generation's ability to see past the red and blue was incredibly inspiring and I am confident that these delegates will use this skill set for the betterment of our nation.

On the whole, Washington Week was unforgettable from start to finish. I am eternally grateful for the choices made, both large and small, that led to my role in this experience. I am left with a newfound hope for the future of the United States, and a confidence that it will be this new generation that continues the legacy of our nation as the land of the free and the home of the brave.