

## Deepti Pillai, MN – 2024

The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) Washington Week is idyllic—a fairytale week. I was fascinated by the program in ninth grade, long before I could apply. In what world would I ever be in the same room as a Supreme Court justice or president of the United States? Even after being selected, it was hard to believe I was bound to attend Washington Week. Little did I know that what I anticipated would only be one-millionth of the magic I was yet to see. This week was filled with endless pinch-me moments.

Unsurprisingly, every speaker we were privileged to meet and ask questions to was inspiring, entertaining, and strong - with so much wisdom to offer us. But, what made these conversations so irreplaceable was the openness that the USSYP has fostered. The level of freeness with which these high-profile public servants spoke to us is unfathomable. They authentically answered questions, shared their personal stories, and provided genuine advice. Candid conversations made the week. These conversations enabled us to see the character and humanity of these well-renowned government officials. With Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan, we were privileged to hear about her jurisprudence and her greatest mentors and role models in her field. Yet, we also enjoyed the stories of her unexpected friendship with former Justice Antonin Scalia and their hunting trips together. We listened to Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden gush over Lizzo visiting her, saw President Joe Biden as a grandfather and husband, and laughed at Senator Bill Cassidy's jokes about having to perform colonoscopies.

Despite their various backgrounds and roles, every speaker had so much in common due to their commitment to helping others. We got to find familiarity and common ground with people of drastically different political affiliations, home lives, beliefs, and personalities. Due to this, we got to see these people as similar to us. This opportunity for connection and authenticity is why USSYP successfully builds hope and excitement in every delegate. Congressman Emanuel Cleaver remarked, "I hope you get infected with the disease called politics—the good is still here." USSYP, without a doubt, infected 104 ambitious, altruistic young leaders.

I will never stop raving about one event of the week: watching the State of the Union (SOTU) address in the White House before meeting the President of the United States Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden. This night was characterized by unbridled joy and exhilaration. Once in the East Room of the White House, we could not get enough photos to commemorate this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Nothing can live up to the feeling of sitting amongst my favorite people and closest friends in the White House, shouting and applauding the SOTU. I will never forget the moment President Biden said, "And it's because of you that tonight we can proudly say the State of our Union is strong and getting stronger!", we all jumped out of our seats to cheer. When President Biden later entered the room, we cheered so loudly and could not contain our ear-to-ear grins. Not only did President Biden take a picture with us and see us after such a critical and tiring night, but he chose to speak with us for thirty minutes, candidly sharing his path to politics and government.

This week outdid every expectation I had. I could never have imagined learning and experiencing so much in one week, let alone meeting my best friends, finding a friend and advisor for life in my military mentor, eating extravagant three-course meals, spending nights in a gorgeous hotel, performing a dance routine to boast Coach 2 supremacy, or enjoying the cutest branded USSYP water bottle and stickers. I am forever indebted to this program for all the joy it brought to my life that week and for all the joy it will bring me for the rest of my life. I am so lucky to have enjoyed something so meaningful that I could not help but leave the Mayflower with endless tears streaming down my face.