

## James Thibault, NH – 2024

“Just specimens is all New Hampshire has,/One each of everything as in a show-case /...There quality makes up for quantity.” Robert Frost’s description of New Hampshire in his poem named for the Granite State rings especially true upon looking back on the United States Senate Youth Program. The program only picks two students per state—truly quality making up for quantity, I suppose—so to be considered quality enough to represent my beloved home state was an immense honor. What I didn’t realize when I received that acceptance letter in early December, however, was how much this experience would not only grow my love of New Hampshire, but also expand my appreciation for the rest of our great nation.

Because the program represents every state (as well as the District of Columbia and the schools on our overseas military bases), there is a wide range of ideological diversity among the delegates. Anyone with an understanding of our modern political discourse, or the behavior of teenagers, would imagine that this would be a recipe for disaster. However, this was not the case at all. While we absolutely disagreed on many things, it was never an uncivil disagreement. We discussed many topics from abortion to school choice to theology openly without malice. If there was something that one of us didn’t understand or know, we asked questions to broaden our understanding of the topic from that perspective—no gotchas or deception, but rather a true and sincere desire to understand the other side of the argument better.

As a delegate from New Hampshire to a politically-oriented program, I felt an obligation to share with as many people as possible the beauties of the New Hampshire political system. Delegates from states as large as Texas could not comprehend why a state as small as New Hampshire needed a 424-person legislature, but this reflects a general culture shock that we all experienced from interacting with each other. Every state has intricacies like these, such as Nebraska’s unique unicameral legislature, and every state’s political climate is different, so while they were shocked by our system, I was just as shocked by some of the quirks of theirs as well as their knowledge and insight regarding them. In no other program could I imagine being able to learn so much about so many amazing parts of our country in such a short amount of time.

However, the most crucial part of the week is by far getting to meet all of the other delegates. They truly are some of the best of the best from each of their states, whether we agree or not. Some of my closest friends from the program are the people I disagree with the most, and that is the beautiful part of USSYP. We bonded over shared passions, while talking through disagreements and still respecting each other. We supported each other throughout the week and beyond, and we truly became lasting friends. This is especially true of my co-delegate, Michael, who I immensely respect and was honored to serve alongside.

The United States Senate Youth Program is truly like no other. I went in with high expectations, yet they were still exceeded. While there were many incredible places we got to visit—including the White House on the night of the State of the Union—and many high-level government officials that we got to meet, such as Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan and even President Biden, I view all of that as secondary. Those activities were merely a backdrop to the people that we were able to truly build connections with: not the leaders currently in power, but the next generation of leaders, and unlike the distant political figures we got to meet, we can draw upon these friends we’ve made and support each other, ideally, for the rest of our lives, which is a true blessing. “Just specimens is all Senate Youth has, there quality makes up for quantity.”