

## **Leila Balsiger, SD – 2024**

Delegates and distinguished guests, I would like to begin by stating that summarizing an experience that quite literally changed my perspective on life seems fairly impossible, but I will give it my best shot to try to describe even a fourth of it. At the beginning of this journey, the application process, I vividly recall assuring myself that the reality of my being chosen was an improbable one as I wrestled with the fact that a seemingly minuscule number of two people from each state would be selected as delegates for the program. Ensuring that stayed on the backburner of my mind, I, of course, did more research on the United States Senate Youth Program after my counselor strongly advised me to apply for the scholarship. From the moment I viewed the previous year's slideshow and overview, the wishful hope I had formerly had of being a South Dakota delegate for Washington Week 2024 evolved into an outright fantasy. Little did I know my imagination never could have dreamed of the remarkable week I soon became destined to experience.

One could say my first trip to the United States Capitol was nothing short of extraordinary. Engaging in discourse with 24 incredible speakers, many of whom were highly esteemed government administrators including POTUS, undergoing elaborate tours, gaining exclusive access to historic monuments as well as our democratic republic's buildings, and being mentored by some of the most inspiring military officials in the nation seems fitting of that recognition. But, while I am forever grateful to have encountered these once-in-a-lifetime activities, the true indebtedness I owe to this foundation is for connecting me with new lifelong friends and the future leaders of our country. The environment our gathering created was special in that we each felt a sense of understanding for one another; something many of us had little experience with at our hometowns and high schools. Sure, intimidation jitters were present in the first few hours of our arrival, but that soon transformed into a beautiful connection beyond anything I could have anticipated.

Brian Kamoie, the Deloitte managing director, USSYP alum, and a presumably popular name in these reflection essays, delivered a speech worthy of praise. Strikingly, I recall him stating earnestly that he, too, had felt like an outcast surrounded by America's greatest youthful minds at the beginning of his time at the program. This acknowledgment was yet another example of commonality that I could not have resonated with more. Following that statement, though, Mr. Kamoie went on to declare that not only did he warrant worthiness and belonging at the Senate Youth Program, but so did all of us; collectively, we were ALL the brilliant brains and upcoming assets of our nation. More than the most renowned people we heard from, this man's message encouraged me to continue evolving, expanding, and improving my contribution to the world which I will now have the privilege of remembering in any strife or difficulty I face in the future.

This sentiment was not a rarity during Washington Week. Our interactions with Military Mentors are a superb example as well. Personally, their stories and backgrounds were some I found to be the most galvanizing of the entire event. With Capt. Durbin's academic history, the Lebanese constitution-writing Capt. Puntoriero casually did, and Captain McGurkin's message on our way to Arlington Cemetery, I was in absolute awe of them. Their exemplary actions and beings are things I will revere as motivation for my own for years to come.

The Hearst Foundations administered a week deserving of being labeled as one of the best of my life. My co-delegate and roommate are now some of the closest relationships I am blessed to have, and it is all due in thanks to the generosity of this institution. Additionally, I was in the presence of future senators, reporters, doctors, scientists, and possibly even the president at the week-long event which, as one might expect, creates unbelievable contacts and an amazing network for the bright tomorrow we surely have with this talent leading our nation (although the mentors might have had a different notion of us after the hundredth forgotten I.D.). Along with their excellent academic minds, my peers had no lack of humor or friendliness. From the moment I stepped into the Mayflower Hotel, I was met with everlasting smiles and the most welcoming souls I'll forever appreciate. My favorite memories, though, include when Ahryanna scratched two water bottle lids together and pretended to be a duck, Joshua and Wright completely ChatGPTed new lyrics to their slandering rap after seeing everyone's heartfelt Coach performances, and all of us singing "Country Roads" one last time together Friday night.

If the tears at the Farewell Dinner and then again when departing for the airport weren't evidence enough, I can attest this program will be dearly missed and always cherished. Opportunities like this excite students for their potential and recognize their hard work up to that point. As Charles Q. Brown would say, "It doesn't matter if the glass is half empty or half full, it's about how you fill up the glass." The United States Senate Youth Program has shown me that not only am I going to strive to fill America's glass in the best way possible but so are my fellow delegates, which gives this country and myself hope for the product of our combined efforts towards greatness.