

## Diya Oommen, UT – 2024

If someone had told me that by the end of the week, I'd be an expert on Lizzo's instrumental talents thanks to the Librarian of Congress, I'd have laughed it off as unlikely. But as the week of the 62<sup>nd</sup> annual U.S. Senate Youth Program unfolded, filled with unexpected learning opportunities at every turn, my newfound knowledge perfectly encapsulated the ever surprising depth of experiences that Washington Week offered.

In fact, one of the most unexpected and rewarding aspects of the program wasn't found in the formal presentations or scheduled tours, but in the late-night conversations and the bumpy coach rides between venues. It was during these times that I truly got to know my fellow delegates—not just as future leaders, but as friends. Under the soft glow of the bus interior lights, we shared stories from our hometowns and debated policy with a passion that only seemed to grow as the miles passed. These moments, stripped of formality and filled with laughter over shared snacks, revealed the genuine characters behind the professional aspirations.

After one of these bus rides, we had the privilege of meeting attorneys from the Department of Justice, one of whom who had been involved in a discrimination case in a school district near my hometown—the case of Izzy Tichenor. This was a story I had followed closely, being deeply moved and troubled by the issues at its core. As I shook her hand, there was a moment of mutual recognition of the case's significance, and the conversation quickly deepened beyond formalities. Sharing how deeply Izzy's story had impacted each of us, emotions ran high, and I found myself fighting back tears. Our meeting highlighted the tangible impacts of the work done by those in public service and reinforced my own commitment to pursuing a career where I could make a similar impact.

It was a similar sentiment to that shared by Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg during one of our first sessions, as he noted, "The further I got from home, the more important it was that I was from somewhere," a reminder of the roots that ground us and the diverse perspectives we bring to the table in national dialogues. This statement set the tone for the week, emphasizing the importance of remembering where we come from as we contribute to shaping where we are going.

As I look back on this unforgettable experience, my heart is full of gratitude for the USSYP directors and staff, The Hearst Foundations, and the distinguished guests who made this week possible. Special thanks also go to our photographers, Jakub Mosur and Erin Lubin, who captured the essence of our Washington Week, allowing us to keep these memories alive as we all continue on our individual paths. Thank you, USSYP, for this incredible journey and the many journeys it has undoubtedly set in motion.