

Paarth Sharma, MI – 2025

“Live on the sunrise side of the mountain, to see the day that is coming, not the day that has come.”

-Brett Kavanaugh

I didn't know it then, but as I sat in the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel on that first night of Washington Week, my head full of imposter syndrome and doubt, I was at the beginning of the most transformative week of my life.

The 63rd Annual United States Senate Youth Program was always a distant dream for me, until it wasn't. When I got the notification that I received the nomination, I sat in disbelief as I predicted what my future would be. As an uncertain first semester senior in high school, the idea that I would soon be with 103 of the brightest minds in our nation enthralled me. From that first night, my fellow delegates' experiences, ideas, and beliefs about the world surrounding us challenged me to think, an experience I am forever grateful for.

Our Washington Week came during a period of struggle in American history, one that we were reminded of from the start of the week, and shaped our experiences to come. From the initial remarks, Program Director Rayne Guilford reminded us our year of USSYP will stand with the ones run during the Vietnam War, the Cold War and after 9/11: times of heightened political divisiveness and distrust in our nation's government. However, this only increased the necessity for the next generation of public servants to be brought up with unity in mind, a sentiment I really resonated with. Looking around in that room in the Mayflower Hotel on the first night of Washington Week: I knew I was surrounded by America's future leaders.

Throughout the week, I was lucky enough to engage with many of America's foremost leaders, whether it was a breakfast setting at the Mayflower Hotel, or in our capital's many bureaucratic buildings. While every keynote spoke to me in some way, a couple stuck out.

On Monday, we had the pleasure of speaking to a wide slate of leaders, among them were Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden and Senate Historian Katherine Scott. As they gave their presentations on unsung heroes throughout American history, whose stories were preserved in the expansive library that surrounded us, I was reminded of the true breadth of the government. So many facets of the world I was learning about were new to me, and perhaps one of the fondest memories I look back on was being pleasantly surprised by that Monday afternoon luncheon.

On Tuesday, I had the distinct honor of giving introductory remarks to Mr. Philip Laidlaw, a Senior Ranking official in the U.S. Department of State. Sitting in the Benjamin Franklin Dining Room in the Department of State's 8th floor, I knew that this was going to be one of, if not the premier dining experience of my life. I envisioned my future as a public servant, working in the Department of State for a cause greater than myself. Reflecting on USSYP, I am so grateful that I got to experience something like this so hands-on.

As I flip through my journal of the week, I try to make sense of my discombobulated notes, sketches of my fellow delegates, and dialogue written in the margins. While not entirely coherent, the journal pages pulse with wonder, curiosity, and ambition for my future. One of the things that I am most grateful I wrote down are the quotes that the keynote speakers were able to share with us. Chief among them was Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Brett Kavanaugh's words as we sat in the pews of the Supreme Court on Monday evening. “Live on the sunrise side of the mountain”, he said, “See the day that is coming, not the day that has come.”

As I enter this new chapter of my life and reflect on USSYP, I remind myself every day to look on the sunrise side of the mountain. To move past the divisiveness that has taken over this nation and forge a pathway to a better and brighter future for a more united nation, looking on the sunrise side of the mountain is critical. Washington Week has been the defining moment of my future career as a public servant, and as these experiences and connections will stay with me for the rest of my life, I will never forget to look on the sunrise side of the mountain.