

**Rania Das, CT – 2026**

“The heights by great men reached and kept  
Were not attained by sudden flight,  
But they, while their companions slept,  
Were toiling upward in the night.”

This stanza, the third-to-last of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1858 poem, “The Ladder of St. Augustine,” has served as Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson’s guiding mantra throughout her storied career in public service. From clerking under Justice Stephen Breyer to ultimately succeeding him as the first Black woman on the United States Supreme Court, her journey embodies Longfellow’s vision of quiet, persistent ascent. In her remarks to the 64th delegation of the United States Senate Youth Program, she reminded us that public service is defined not by sudden triumph, but rather by consistent, often unseen labor.

I came to see this poem as a reflection of what a life in public service demands. Justice Jackson’s story underscored that progress is rarely linear; rather, it is the unpredictability of the path that fosters the most resilient and effective leaders. To serve the public does not mean to stand above it, but to remain deeply rooted within it.

This idea was reinforced on our final day, during a long-awaited visit to the Pentagon. However imposing the Pentagon was perceived to be, General Dan Caine’s message was strikingly grounded: humility is essential to leadership. “Leaders are readers,” he told us, emphasizing the importance of learning from others and remaining open to diverse perspectives.

Leadership is not defined by the lofty titles associated with it. Instead, it begins with open and honest reflection, and the willingness to confront oneself and ask: how can I be a better leader than I was yesterday?

The Senate Youth Program fostered this exact habit of introspection. Surrounded by peers of extraordinary caliber, I was challenged not only to grow, but to reconsider what meaningful leadership looks like. The most impactful leaders are not captivated by the grandeur of their title; they remain connected to the people they serve. They confront difficult questions with honesty and work through challenges with the goal of uplifting others.

Public service, then, should never be reduced to the mere pursuit of a title. It is something intrinsic—an enduring commitment to service borne from care for your community. It demands that we invest not only in the present, but in the future, nurturing the generations that will follow.

Washington Week broadened my understanding of service beyond the confines of government. Whether through law, education, the arts, or advocacy, service can take many forms, so long as it is guided by a genuine dedication to others.

As the Amtrak Northeast Regional departed from Union Station the following Saturday morning, I carried with me a sense of conviction that had quietly formed throughout the week. I left with faith in the future of our generation: a generation willing to question, to defy the status quo, and to reimagine what effective leadership can be.

To serve the public effectively, we must first recognize the humanity that animates public life. Constituencies cannot be reduced merely to fast facts or data points; behind every constituent lies an individual with lived experiences and stories that demand to be heard. As Justice Jackson reminded us, “the life of the law is not logic; it is experience.” To uphold the law is, ultimately, to honor those experiences.

Upon reflecting on my Washington Week experience, the closing stanzas of Longfellow’s aforementioned poem come to mind:

“Standing on what too long we bore  
With shoulders bent and downcast eyes,  
We may discern — unseen before —  
A path to higher destinies,

Nor deem the irrevocable Past  
As wholly wasted, wholly vain,  
If, rising on its wrecks, at last  
To something nobler we attain.”

In the one week I spent hearing from the nation’s most prominent leaders and connecting with my fellow delegates, I was reminded that the path to public service is often rugged. As young people, our leadership journeys are only just beginning. The journey is bound to be challenging, yet I believe it is the endurance of such challenges that will give purpose to all that we hope to do.