

Arienne Medina, MA – 2026

Reflection

Growing up, I always heard the saying, “it is about the journey, not the destination.” However, it was not until the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) that I listened to this lesson. From the application for USSYP, to the flight back home after Washington Week, students, like myself, learned the importance of authenticity, diplomacy, and service.

Being alongside 104 students of the highest caliber, I was challenged, but not in the way I expected. I assumed it would be a battle to make myself stand out and prove that I belonged. I could not have been more wrong. However, I was still challenged. I was challenged to think deeper, to ask hard questions, and to answer even harder ones. In the USSYP spaces, I felt inspired by the greatness and possibility around me. For the first time in a while, I felt hopeful. Not just for my future, or these students’ future, but for our world’s future.

Keynote Speaker Bill Doherty set the USSYP stage by emboldening us to get comfortable in the uncomfortable. He challenged us to seek those we disagree with, and still see those people as human. From this moment on, I was acutely aware of the responsibility I held in molding how I would internalize this experience. Before every speaker, I referred back to my notes from Mr. Bill Doherty. I made a commitment. Not only to myself, but to the country I hope to serve one day. My commitment was to be open, to seek new perspectives, and to find middle ground with those I may have considered my enemies.

I was particularly touched by the stories of Mr. Charles Bolden and Ms. Rachel Scott. Before Washington Week, when I imagined someone “serving their country,” my mind went to military work or elected positions. However, these two trailblazers have served and continue to serve the United States in completely different ways. In ways that are absolutely essential to democracy. I continue to be inspired by the advice and experiences I heard from the many speakers during Washington Week- but especially from those of marginalized communities. As a Mexican woman, I do not often see myself represented in the spaces I seek to one day influence. However, with USSYP I have been empowered to make the space I need.

Equally as influential as the keynote speakers were the Military Mentors. Their stories of sacrifice, discipline, and adventure created an environment spearheaded by drive. All of the mentors were passionate about their work, and passionate about working towards the betterment of the country.

In all, the United States Senate Youth Program taught me about civil service and the functions of government, but it also taught me how to be a global citizen, a friend, and a leader. I feel privileged to have experienced the long, exhausting days of Washington Week, and to have processed those days as lessons for perseverance and responsibility. I truly could not speak more highly of this program, the Hearst Foundations, the keynote speakers, the military mentors, Ms. Donna Kalajian Lagani, Mr. Paul Dino Dinovitz, and all the dedicated peoples that made USSYP possible.