

Crosby Parker, MS – 2026

America has never been static. From thirteen colonies seeking independence to a global power of fifty states, the nation has constantly evolved. Yet through periods of division and unity alike, one principle has endured: *E pluribus unum* - out of many, one. My experience at the United States Senate Youth Program transformed how I understand that ideal, showing me that unity is not automatic, but something we must actively choose to build.

When I arrived in Washington, D.C., I expected to learn about government. What I did not expect was how deeply the program would shape my perspective on leadership, service, and the future of our country.

Early in the week, a discussion with Braver Angels challenged us to confront the growing division in America. Rather than avoiding disagreement, we were encouraged to engage in open dialogue grounded in mutual respect. That idea - simple in theory but difficult in practice - became a lens through which I viewed the rest of the week. That lesson was reinforced through conversations with leaders across our government.

Hearing Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson speak about her role on the Supreme Court emphasized the importance of integrity, humility, and respect for the Constitution. At the Department of State and the Department of Agriculture, I saw how policy decisions impact both global relationships and everyday American lives. Listening to voices like Mark Shriver and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as Secretary Pete Hegseth, expanded my understanding of service - whether through public office, humanitarian work, or military leadership.

One of the most meaningful moments of the week was laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Standing there, I felt a profound sense of responsibility and connection to those who have served before me. As someone who hopes to join the Air Force like my father, that experience was especially significant. It transformed my aspiration into something more concrete - a commitment not just to serve, but to lead with purpose and honor.

Throughout the week, the Military Mentors who guided us left a lasting impression. Their discipline, humility, and dedication embodied the kind of leadership I strive to develop. They didn't just lead us through the program - they showed us what it means to lead others with strength and character. They have inspired me to one day apply to be in their shoes.

Equally impactful were the relationships formed with fellow delegates. Through shared experiences and open conversations, we built mutual respect and genuine friendships. In discussing complex political issues, I found myself not only defending my views, but also rethinking them. For the first time, I saw how meaningful dialogue can lead not to conflict, but to understanding.

Visiting the White House and other historic institutions brought history to life, but it was these personal interactions - with leaders, mentors, and peers - that truly defined my experience. They showed me that the future of this country depends not on avoiding our differences, but on engaging with them constructively. Before this program, I was uncertain whether our nation could overcome its deep divisions. Now, I am convinced that it can. Unity does not require uniformity; it requires respect, dialogue, and a shared commitment to something greater than ourselves. The United States Senate Youth Program did more than teach me about government - it challenged me to become a better citizen and future leader. As I look ahead to a career of service, I carry with me the belief that *E pluribus unum* is not just a motto, but a responsibility. If we choose to live it out - in our communities, our conversations, and our leadership - then we can build a future where, out of many, we truly become one.