

## **Nina Bhattacharjee, WI – 2026**

Awake at 3:00 AM, I frantically read the airline's update: the thunderstorms flashing outside my window had officially delayed my flight. Little did I know, another wave of obstacles was about to hit my travel plans—mechanical issues, terminal changes, and delays on the runway—all keeping my plane grounded for hours. By the time I escaped the jet bridge, I would need to sprint through the Detroit airport to make my connecting flight to D.C.

Weaving past strangers to find a gate that was beginning to feel out of reach, I forgot the fears that had been occupying my head in the weeks leading up to USSYP. Anxieties over inadequacy were left behind as I struggled not to miss my shot at just being in the room with my fellow delegates.

Looking back, it feels oddly symbolic. No matter how incredible a destination D.C. would prove to be, getting there would be an arrival at something larger than myself.

That same urgency followed me into Washington Week, into the quiet of the Supreme Court room. We listened to Justice Jackson discuss her considerations before making decisions that shape the lives of millions—a balancing act of precedence and principle. Leadership became immediate and weighty.

And it didn't stop there. In the ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel, ABC News Political Correspondent Rachel Scott challenged us not to stay silent when we find ourselves “in the room.” Rarely are we handed the leadership and opportunities that we are capable of making change with. Yes, there are some roles we grow into, but many happen before we feel ready. So, when the chance comes, she reminds us that it is not enough to be present. To secure your next moment, it is your responsibility to speak. From then on, leadership became something we were expected to claim.

But just as much as I learned from our speakers, I learned from my fellow delegates. In conversations with peers from across the United States, I witnessed the very disagreements without division that each of our speakers hoped we would achieve. Although we debated, everything from certain speakers' answers to each other's political opinions, we were not arguing to win. In a time when politics can leave Americans disheartened and frustrated, the United States Senate Youth Program revealed that leadership from the new generation would be defined by a willingness to engage thoughtfully.

Each moment built upon the last. What started as awe morphed into clarity. When I came to Washington, D.C., I expected to observe leadership; instead, I left understanding that observation is not enough. Because once you see what is possible, once you witness the people, the decisions, the problems, the responsibility, you can no longer stand still.

To my fellow delegates, our week in Washington may be over; we may be unpacked and settled back into our routines, but our role as delegates is far from complete. We were inspired, yes, but that comes with obligation. This is a challenge to step forward and lead with intention. We pushed each other to ask more of each speaker and to reach greater levels of understanding. Now, outside the incubator of the Senate Youth Program, it is our job not only to carry those values forward, but also to continue to ask the same of one another.

To any future delegate, your biggest takeaway from the Senate Youth Program will not be the pages of advice you hear from speakers. No, it will be the network of other leaders who now recognize your readiness and potential and expect you to rise to it.

Looking back, I would run through the airport all over again, but now I know what I was running to.