

Marlo Ellis, WY – 2026

I forgot my name tag at my house, the morning I left for D.C. I had deliberately gone over my packing list to ensure I hadn't left anything behind, but sure enough, I did. In the bathroom, I watched two girls, about my age, reveal a name badge out of their backpacks. It read, "United States Senate Youth Program," and in that moment, my heart dropped. All of the fear I had felt in the application process, selection, and painfully long travel day had become a reality. I should not be here. Knowing there was no going back to my house, two thousand miles away, to retrieve my long-forgotten name tag, I charged forward with a smile on my face, determined to hide my embarrassment. Both girls shook my hand, excited to meet me. They reminded me we would receive official badges that evening, and there was nothing to worry about.

A common theme throughout my week while at the United States Senate Youth Program was understanding why I was chosen to be there. Many different speakers, luncheons, and tours took place that week, all of which I will rave about for years to come. The most important lesson I have taken from this experience, though, is the importance of self-certainty.

On Tuesday evening, Major General Charles Bolden had wise words that I kept close with me throughout the rest of the week. "If others cannot see your value just by your presence in the room, it is a waste of your time trying to prove them otherwise." Major General Bolden was a captivating speaker, and these words have already begun to redefine how I view myself in different aspects of my life. The more I have thought about what these words mean to me, the more I understand the beauty in this program, which I think more often than not, is overlooked. Apart from the beautiful meals and honorable Military Mentors, I will forever hold in high regard all of the friends I made.

Returning to my feelings of incompetence, I think I have figured out how to dismantle self-doubt. Being around students my age with accolades that stretch for miles, in theory, should be intimidating. What is wonderful about this program is that each delegate was thoughtful, kind, and friendly. I don't know if I will ever enter a room with the (future) leaders of America and the walls echo with laughter and poise.

Entering this week, I felt anxious and scared that I was not enough. After my departure, I am left with an overwhelming surge of pride and ambition that I can only attribute to my fellow delegates. Defeating the lingering imposter syndrome comes from within but having a group of inspiring individuals that welcome your presence in any room, helps.