

Joleen Bakalova, CA - 2022

I was shocked to be selected as a delegate. I almost passed out when the California Superintendent of Public Instruction called with the news. I had heard about the program years prior at the start of my public service, but I always saw the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) as a far-off dream, as an unreachable opportunity. Back in October, thinking there was little chance of being selected as a Junior (and more so a Junior from California), I was just an ounce away from not applying.

Obviously, I made the right decision. And I am deeply grateful to everyone who encouraged me to take a chance on myself.

Like my fellow delegates, I was not sure how effective a Zoom format would be after a whole school year and a half online. Though I was ecstatic and honored, I was slightly skeptical of doing Washington Week online. However, I was blown away by the engaging, exciting program I got to participate in.

In what universe would I get to introduce a Supreme Court Justice and interact with the Ambassador to the United Nations? How is it even possible that I was chosen for this program? I found myself asking these questions the entire week, and I certainly had mini joyful freak-outs throughout each of the short breaks over the once-in-a-lifetime experience.

I absolutely loved my military mentor group, led by the brilliant Captain Dryhurst. I absolutely loved getting to know my fellow delegates. I absolutely loved meeting alumni of the program and learning more about careers in public service.

Although it has been a few weeks since Washington Week ended, I am still in awe of the experience and hold tightly onto the wisdom imbued by speakers and mentors. I know I will treasure this program for the rest of my life, and I look forward to colliding with fellow delegates in our future careers. Words cannot capture all of my emotions and thoughts, but I hope that I can convey that being a part of USSYP has been transformative. I feel that I can now see a vaster horizon ahead and feel an even deeper commitment to serving communities around the world. I am so incredibly grateful and honored.

Thank you to the whole team and staff at USSYP for all of the work and effort you have put into making this an amazing experience. Thank you to the California Department of Education for taking a chance on a Junior and providing me the opportunity of a lifetime. Thank you to the Hearst Foundations and the U.S. Senate for this incredible program and for helping inspire the next generation of leaders in our nation. Thank you to everyone who has helped me along this journey: my family, my friends, my team, Ms. Moon, Mrs. Mackenzie, Ms. Nancy, Mr. Perez, Mrs. McCue and CVHS's administration, Maha Rizvi and Assembly Majority Leader Eloise Reyes, Priya Vedula, Maya Rodriguez, Alex Beltran, Chris McClain, and so many others. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.