

Joshua Ching, HI – 2022

What does it mean to move toward a more perfect union?

For Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed, it's about perseverance – because “failure doesn't mean it's the end of the story. Failure means you try again.”

For Senator Chris Coons, it's about compromise – because “our political system doesn't work without it.”

For Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, it's about passion – because “it's not about the job you have, but the difference you want to make.”

But for me? A more perfect union was a mere obscurity – as a kid growing up in the era of COVID-19, reckonings on racial justice, and teetering toward environmental calamity, it was easy to lose hope. The U.S. Senate Youth Program, however, not only gave me hope in the dark, but gave me an answer to that ever-pressing question.

From the onset of the program, I met impressive students from across the nation who brought a myriad of perspectives that worked to change my own. In our small military mentor groups, we discussed hot-button political issues – from the social responsibility of corporations to the Ukraine-Russia war. With each contribution of the delegates in our small group, however, came a new story bridled with their unique experiences. Whether coming from a small town in Wyoming or a city in Massachusetts, the diversity of perspective brought a new sense of awareness, creating a tapestry of lived experiences that reflected *our* America.

Moreover, our conversations were held with the highest respect – even when our beliefs differed. It gave me hope that our generation, entering a world riddled with political polarization, has the tenacity to resist devolving into partisan bickering. It gave me hope that we could be the generation that overcomes the human indecency that stalls our political process. It gave me hope that our generation could effectuate a cultural sea change, and bring the center of government back to the people, moving us toward a more perfect union.

But beyond just our military mentor groups, the amazing line-up of speakers for the program had the same effect on me. The more and more public figures we heard from, the more I realized a common theme threaded through each of their conversations – an aspirational vision that politics should be about connection, about reforging what division breaks down. Senator Susan Collins, in particular, mentioned something that struck me – that “it's hard to hate someone you've broken bread with.” Although we weren't able to literally “break bread” with the other delegates or distinguished speakers, getting to know them personally, at least on surface level, broke down those barriers. Even when I couldn't help but disagree with opinions opposing mine, the connections that we, well, virtually built dissipated any potentially personal animosity. Frankly, it was refreshing – and I loved the fact that it was.

Those distinguished speakers, aside from just reinforcing the principle of connection in politics, introduced me to new and exciting facets of the world that I'd never thought to explore. FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel, for example, provided insight into the consolidation of broadcast companies, the prevalence of media bias, and the necessity of the Internet for 21st century success, all concepts I'd heard of but hadn't fully explored. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, gave me the opportunity to ask about the status of shutting down the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility, to which he responded with an insightful analysis of the

military's adverse impact on the environment. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg gave an exciting account of the importance of electric vehicles and transitioning toward more sustainable infrastructure. Beyond just learning about the topic areas these people specialized in, what I came to recognize was the genuine passion these public figures had. It allowed me to see bits and pieces of the other delegates in these speakers – that passion for what you love is one of, if not the most important factors in making a difference.

So what does it mean to move toward a more perfect union? To me, it's about holding out hope. It's about the willingness to understand different perspectives. It's about compromise. It's about an unbridled curiosity to learn. It's about wanting to make a difference.

I know, more than anything, that this program changed my life. Perhaps, after this, we're one step closer to that perfect union.