

Elena Serpas, MA – 2022

My mother talks about inflection points. In calculus, an inflection point is a point where a function changes concavity, i.e., from being "concave up" to being "concave down" or vice versa, or so says Khan Academy. In life, my mother says, an inflection point is a defining moment where one knows that they are poised for transformational change impact, where one rises to a new note or begins a new path. Without a doubt, the United States Senate Youth Program has been an inflection point for me; the speakers and delegates have exposed me to new pathways for justice helped me build networks, background, and experience to more strongly advocate for policy change.

The speakers have instilled in me a more complex and intersectional understanding of bipartisanship and American political culture – exposing me to perspectives I wouldn't have otherwise understood. For example, when the Associate Attorney General of the United States, Vanita Gupta, spoke about despair being a privilege, at first, I felt an urge to disagree strongly. Why would despair be a privilege? Why would upset be a concession? But when I heard Ms. Gupta's explanation, I changed my tune. It is much easier to be on the outside, criticizing current government institutions, explained Ms. Gupta, than it is to actively work and organize to further equitable solutions. Indeed, as Ms. Gupta said, the most impactful movements for change – the fight for Black liberation, reproductive justice, gay rights, Indigenous protections– have been led by courageous leaders who refused to give in to despair. The changemakers driving these movements worked within their communities and different levels of government to alter inequitable systems and pursue a more perfect union. Speaking with Vanita Gupta, Dr. Betty Koed, and other leaders who lead the change on the issues I care about – and continue not to surrender to despair – exposed me to insightful perspectives that I will always remember as I explore new paths in social justice, public leadership, and the nonprofit sector.

Further, speaking with my fellow delegates who come from different communities and walks of life has also exposed me to new perspectives. I spoke with delegates who came from places in our nation where the nearest store was thirty miles away and delegates who lived in large cities where the cost of living was growing increasingly inaccessible. To have profound and open conversations with such a diverse group of people is an honor that I will carry with me always. I'll remember what my friends shared about their experiences in different parts of the country when I think about generating reform on the national level. The virtual week I spent in Washington and the community of young activists I joined have transformed me; I understand more about my country and the compassionate, creative student activists who have the courage to push for change.