

Ellie Janda, NE – 2022

On the morning of March 6, 2022, I sat at my desk in the corner of my bedroom with a wide array of USSYP merchandise, a loading zoom screen, an elevated heart rate, and a beautiful new moleskin notebook and matching gel pen placed before me. I have always been a lover of stationery, therefore when I received my sizeable welcome box in the mail, naturally, my favorite items were the pen and notebook. I viewed every page as a new opportunity for new information to be recorded and ideas expressed. The United States Senate Youth Program far exceeded my expectations, and not only when it came to my notes. I logged out of my computer on the night of March 9th blown away by each and every encounter and experience and with many tidbits of valuable information from passionate speakers, 86 full pages of memories, and tangible plans of action to positively impact this generation and the world.

While I was eager to see the list of government officials and leaders, I came into the program with many assumptions about the personalities and intentions of each of the speakers. Through speaking one on one with my home state's senators and having the opportunity to ask questions to our nation's leaders, the United States Senate Youth Program opened my eyes to the humanity in politicians, and it made them seem less like fictional characters and more like genuine individuals with similar goals: serving constituents and creating a better tomorrow. This realization gave an elevated sense of hope for our nation's future.

Another memorable part of the program was the daily meetings with our military mentor groups. I had the honor and privilege of being placed in Lieutenant Commander Megan Concepcion's group. We dubbed ourselves the "Declaration Thieves" as a reference to the movie *National Treasure*. I fondly remember our many conversations on topics such as daily agendas, future plans, hot-button political issues, and even cookie flavors. It was a great time to decompress, build relationships, encourage each other, as well as share our excitement for this incredible shared experience.

While absolutely unforgettable, nothing about this week comes close to matching the relationships built with the other delegates. It is inspiring to see how many remarkable things each of these high school students have accomplished in their 16-18 years on this earth and befriending each of these individuals has given me a new perspective, broadened my worldview, and pushed me to grow. I do admit, going into this program alongside 103 of the most talented and high achieving students in the United States made imposter syndrome unavoidable in the beginning. Fortunately, this feeling subsided as the week went on, and I built solid friendships and learned so much from these juniors and seniors from all corners of the country.

At the conclusion of the week, I had a full notebook, an out-of-ink pen, countless memories, a new perspective on political happenings, and 103 new connections. I am eternally grateful for every opportunity that the United States Senate Youth Program has provided and will continue to provide as I go through life, and I will remember fondly this week in my youth that was a defining factor in my outlook on governmental happenings and life in general.