

## Ella Duus, AL – 2023

Being a high school student comes with constant questioning about your plans, from your intended college major to your hypothetical career. While some students have a clear sense of their calling from an early age, my answers ranged from "astronaut" to "scientist" to "president," with only a vague idea that I enjoyed leadership and technology. As I progressed through high school, I developed a passion for computer science and social studies, but still struggled to transform my interests into a concrete career path. This is where the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) entered the picture, providing access to distinguished speakers, supportive mentors, and inspiring delegates. Thanks to USSYP, my answers now encompass fields such as "national security expert," "lawyer," and "diplomat," and I have a road map for achieving my goals.

Throughout the program, my fellow delegates and I were exposed to individuals at the top of our country's national defense program. The highlight of my week was getting to ask a question to General Mark Milley about domestic security. His response was reflective of the intellectual capacity and historical knowledge expected from the top advisor of the Army. Additionally, we were fortunate to hear from Dr. Mara Karlin, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities. Her advice on personal and academic journeys, coupled with the strategic outlook of the United States in the face of evolving global norms, was highly insightful. To top it off, I was placed in the mentor group of Lieutenant Lauren Hickey, a Naval intelligence officer. Her (unclassified) accounts of her daily duties provided an invaluable perspective to my exploration of defense as a career and as a critical aspect of America's leadership and security.

Although I have always been interested in the applications of law to politics and technology, practicing law in itself was never a career that I considered. This changed with a visit to the Department of Justice. It was not until I had the opportunity to visit the Department of Justice that my perspective shifted. During a panel discussion with civil rights lawyers, who specialize in everything from systemic misconduct to educational analysis, I was exposed to the vital role that law plays in the maintenance of democracy and civil liberties. Bill Nolan, a federal prosecutor in the Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit, specifically highlighted the importance of technology and innovation in gathering evidence against human traffickers. This eye-opening experience has sparked a newfound interest in civil rights work, and I am now eager to explore this field during my time in college.

My peers and I also enjoyed lunch at the U.S. Institute of Peace, keynoted by Ambassador Derek Hogan, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs. His commitment to democracy abroad was palpable and dynamic, and his enthusiasm spread to me. Foreign Service Officer had been a go-to answer to queries about my career since I was fortunate enough to grow up with family friends working in the State Department. Now, I could truly envision myself advocating for liberty and democracy abroad as Ambassador Hogan does. He left me with the lasting reminder, "You must learn peace, you must cultivate it."

As I reflect on the reasons why these individuals have left such a deep impression on me, I realize that it's not solely due to their accomplishments. Rather, it's their unwavering dedication to improving our country and the world, with their success being a natural outcome of this commitment. Looking back on my time at the United States Senate Youth Program, I am filled with hope and enthusiasm for what lies ahead. I am immensely grateful for the relationships and connections I have established with my fellow delegates, mentors, and distinguished speakers. These individuals have not only challenged and inspired me but also provided me with a network of support that I can rely on as I navigate my future. USSYP has instilled in me a renewed commitment to finding my path and making a meaningful impact. I hope to use my experiences and knowledge to contribute to a better world and inspire others to do the same.