

Dana Ko, CO – 2023

In the United States, every individual applying for citizenship is required to take a civics test. Though only 10 questions are asked, with 6 correct answers required to pass, this examination strikes fear in the hearts of many aspiring citizens, including my parents. As a child, I would sit with them at the kitchen table, helping them study for the 10 questions that would determine our entire lives. I was young, but even then I knew the gravity of the words “We the People of the United States” that we had to memorize.

Years later, on my first night at the Mayflower Hotel, I opened the pocket Constitution that had been issued to us by the United States Senate Youth Program. There it was again: *We the People of the United States*. Much had changed since one of the very first times I had read those words at my kitchen table. Since then, my parents passed the exam, we had become citizens, and I had embarked on what I knew would be a lifelong journey to define what citizenship means to me as a first-generation American.

Little did I know that the week to follow would contribute more to that definition than my 18 years of life had thus far.

To start, citizenship usually involves allegiance to one’s country—not only shown through legal documents but through our everyday lives. A life in service to this country not only characterized our 17 incredible Military Mentors, but it constituted the foundation of the life’s work of every individual we heard from at Washington Week. From Justice Sotomayor to Surgeon General Vivek Murthy to Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, I was inspired to hear from those who have dedicated their lives to public service. I was especially impacted by the career and work of Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, who spoke on the importance of ensuring equitable education for all of America’s youth. I ardently aspire to follow in their footsteps.

Every time Mr. Cox spoke the words “Delegates and distinguished guests, at this time, dinner is served,” what followed was not only quite possibly the best meals I’ve ever had, but meaningful discussions on every topic under the sun. Over dinner, we had thoughtful debates on gun control, education policy, and the Russia-Ukraine war. We bounced ideas off of each other, disagreed with each other, learned from each other. We examined the biggest issues facing our generation in the hopes of arriving one step closer to solutions that would improve the outlook of our nation.

But most of all, nothing shaped my definition of citizenship more than the 103 delegates I shared this experience with. To say that it was inspiring to be surrounded by the most politically active, brilliant, and talented youth in the country who work tirelessly to improve their communities is an understatement. I am hopeful for the future of this country because I know that the ones to lead it next know what it truly means to be a public servant, an American, and a citizen. After all, “We the People” of both the United States and the United States Senate Youth Program are dedicated to working towards a brighter future.