

Julia Hunt, CO – 2023

When I first became interested in politics during my freshman year of high school, it was because of Senator Amy Klobuchar. Many nights in 2020, I sat after school in dim classrooms with my high school's Young Democrats Club, eating pizza while watching the Democratic presidential debates on TV. As I watched Senator Klobuchar speak, I was touched by her wit and her message of empathy and pragmatism. In those moments, I became enchanted by our democracy and wanted to get involved.

Standing with the other 103 Senate Youth delegates at the annual Senate Reception, I hoped to catch a glimpse of Senator Klobuchar. We had been told that we could not meet the senators of other states—they didn't want us mobbing Bernie Sanders—but I wanted to at least lay eyes on the person who had so greatly impacted my life. You can imagine how I felt when, minutes later, the program director pulled me aside and informed me that Senator Klobuchar's office had requested I meet her. None of us knew why, and I couldn't believe it.

The moment when Senator Klobuchar walked into the room was surreal; under the bright lights and white marble columns of the Kennedy Caucus Room, I felt dizzy with awe. After Senator Klobuchar had talked with the Minnesota delegates, I had the chance to meet her. I barely got to thank her for everything before I started crying, which was embarrassing. She hugged me as I told her that she was my hero. I then found out that her office had been alerted when I mentioned my admiration for her in a local newspaper article about the Senate Youth Program; that was why they arranged for us to meet. I was incredibly grateful that I had gotten so unbelievably lucky.

While meeting Senator Klobuchar was the highlight of the program, there were countless moments throughout the week that profoundly inspired and changed me. I loved seeing a display case at Mount Vernon with a Gumby figurine and silver ring that visitors had dropped there in the 1960s—those small forgotten objects reminded me of all the Americans who had visited the landmark and felt connected to our history in the same way I did. Another moment that stands out in my memory was when I saw the Capitol for the first time, a sight that made me cry (okay, I cry a lot). I felt very grateful and patriotic.

More than anything, the Senate Youth Program gave me a new level of respect and appreciation for our country's military service people. I was surprised that my favorite speaker of the week ended up being General Mark Milley. I'll always remember his words about devoting oneself to the Constitution and to the idea that it is not our differences, but the fact that we're all Americans that matters. The most impactful conversations of the week were the ones I had with the Military Mentors, who openly shared their experiences in countries like Korea and Ukraine. Every day when I hear the Pledge of Allegiance at school, I think back to these courageous people who I had the honor of meeting.

I am a different person from who I was before attending the Senate Youth Program. I can't express how grateful I am for that incredible week of my life. Throughout the program, various speakers assured us that each of us will go on to do big things—however, Justice Sonia Sotomayor had a slightly different message, one that has stuck with me. She told us that a staffer asked her whether she thought one of the 104 delegates would someday become a Supreme Court Justice, to which she replied: "I don't know whether it will be one of you, but it will be someone like you. That's enough for me." Her words struck me as I realized what she meant—it's not about each of us as individuals, but rather a continuing spirit of public service and dedication to the country. We all have this shared purpose that's bigger than ourselves, and that's a beautiful thing.