

Anina Dentel-Pham, DC – 2023

Washington Week is forever etched in my memory. I was surrounded by a vibrant group of delegates, Military Mentors, and United States Senate Youth Program staff who are driven towards making positive change in their communities and are inspired to change the world. My fellow delegates were insightful, diligent, service-driven, intelligent, and talented. It has reinstated my hope for the future. I walk into the world with changemakers who are also my friends.

Fascinating conversations flowed freely. Meeting people for the first time usually follows one formula - "Hello.," "Where are you from?," "What do you do?," and "It was nice meeting you." In mere minutes of meeting my fellow delegates, we were discussing education policy, food insecurity, astrology, classical music, and more. It was something I had never experienced before. To be in a room where I was surrounded by peers who were deeply driven toward community service and aware of the impact they could make was palpable. At the United States Institute of Peace, we were sharing and comparing our religions to understand the roots of our values and how that shapes our views of the world.

One of the most memorable parts of the week was the emphasis on military and protocol. I loved it! Actually, I would have loved to see even more. The Military Mentors taught us etiquette tips. We learned to break our bread into little pieces before adding butter. We cheered with each other when we would remember a new table manner and laughed when we fell back into old habits. At our "practice-State dinners," we had the pleasure of seeing the Joint Armed Forces Color Guard and hearing the Old Guard Fife & Drum Corps play. As we stood and pledged our allegiance to the flag, I was filled with pride to represent the Washington, D.C. community, my school, my family, and myself. I had a personal connection to the U.S. Army Band Brass Quintet - they played "You're a Grand Old Flag," a song I used to sing with my grandpa. Thanks to Washington Week and our Armed Service members, I feel privileged to be an American citizen and empowered to uphold our Constitution and values.

We heard from notable speakers and toured iconic places. As a musician, visiting the Kennedy Center is always an experience. I have attended many shows and seen some of my violin idols there. We had the opportunity to tour private areas of the Kennedy Center like the Presidential Box. Our guide explained the history of why the Center was built. He shed light on the significance of the gifts given by other countries. I always knew it was a center for performing arts, but now I understand why it is also the cultural center of our nation's capital.

As Senator John Hickenlooper said, "we miss opportunities at the risk of our own failure." We took this to heart despite our exhaustion. We stayed eager to see new places, hear from distinguished speakers, learn from our Military Mentors, and interact with each other. Ms. Rayne Guilford called this program the "Olympics of public service" - she was right. In every way, we were exposed to and practiced the inner workings of government, negotiation, and compromise. In this current politically-polarized world, I have no doubt that we will be able to call upon each other to find common ground and craft solutions. I am truly inspired by my fellow delegates, my Military Mentor Lieutenant Hickey, and the entirety of the United States Senate Youth Program. I strive to be a thoughtful leader, empathetic listener, compelling speaker, respectful changemaker, and sincere peacemaker. I will embark on the world with a clearer view of how to navigate situations with confidence, humility, and the ability to make a positive change.

Thank you, United States Senate Youth Program.