

Luke Schofield, GA – 2023

A Week of Welcoming

I have never had an opportunity as transformative as the United States Senate Youth Program. Coming from a small town in rural Appalachia, I had never experienced anything like Washington Week. I was impressed by each and every aspect of the program: the inspiring speakers, the incredible staff, the grand venues, the outstanding food, and the extraordinary delegates. I learned more about our government in one week than I have in any classroom, and the relationships I built with my fellow delegates are some of my strongest bonds. The impact this has made on my heart will never leave me. In a time when the values of our great nation are under attack, I can confidently say that I left Washington with more pride for America than ever before.

The program began with a perfect reminder of the foundation upon which this nation was established: compromise. Strolling through Mount Vernon, I can honestly say I was apprehensive about the week ahead: with polarization being so high among states, could we all get along? But, listening to Senior Interpreter Jeremy Ray, I realized that America has overcome stronger divisions - beginning with the errors of the Articles of Confederation - and that the values instilled in the hearts of every American know no state borders. In the spirit of George Washington, I had some of my favorite and most enriching conversations at Mount Vernon, despite knowing the other delegates for less than 24 hours.

This trend continued with our visit to the Supreme Court, where we learned invaluable lessons from one of our very own justices—Sonia Sotomayor. I was inspired by her story; she observed injustice in her community and so devoted her life to correcting injustice everywhere. But the most significant revelation I had occurred because of one simple quote: “As right as I feel about a decision, I know that the other side is having something taken from them.” In this moment, I reanalyzed each of my beliefs along a more nuanced perspective. One of the main contributors toward polarization is the inability to empathize, yet - if we all simply asked ourselves what the other side is having taken from them - our nation would return to its roots of compromise. Justice Sotomayor’s wise words renewed my faith in America, reminding me that this country is a place where anyone can be a changemaker and where justice always prevails.

These events taught me to look upon the American system with greater scope. Though it may have its flaws, it is truly a bastion for peace, justice, opportunity, and prosperity. I have hope for the future of America because I know for a fact that it is in good hands and - based on my experiences with the other wonderful delegates - *will* be in good hands. The United States Senate Youth Program has left an impact upon me that will never fade, and each time I look upon the American flag in my room I will remember its lessons. So, from the bottom of my heart, thank you to The Hearst Foundations, speakers, Military Mentors, and my fellow delegates—I cannot wait for us to change the world together.