

Daniel Pruder, HI – 2023

Never could I have ever imagined what would transpire during Washington Week. When I first received the email congratulating me on my selection to the United States Senate Youth Program, I was ecstatic yet ignorant of what I would experience three months later and how it would change my life forever.

After a ten-hour flight from my lifelong home of Hawai'i to the nation's capital, I arrived at the grandiose Mayflower Hotel. I ate breakfast in the almost deserted Grand Ballroom as my fellow delegates came from all across the country. Throughout the day, I met new people with diverse backgrounds, concluding with an opening dinner that set the tone for the rest of the week.

The next morning, we embarked on a tour of George Washington's Mount Vernon, viewing a history firsthand that most Americans only learn at school. To be leaders of the present and future, we must look to the past for inspiration. Later in the day, we visited the Kennedy Center, the prime example of the entwinement of public service and culture. The walls of the Center contain a quote from President John F. Kennedy that stuck with me: "This country cannot be materially rich and spiritually poor..."

The following day, we heard from those who work behind the scenes to allow democracy to flourish, from the administration of the world's greatest deliberative body to protecting history that could easily be lost. We later packed into the Supreme Court chamber, learning about the beautifully ornate building where some of the nation's most significant decisions were made before Justice Sonia Sotomayor joined us in the spectator benches. She shared stories from growing up to her actions in the deliberation room. I could have never imagined what it would have been like to see and hear from Justice Sotomayor in person, but leaving the Supreme Court Building, I was more motivated than ever.

Throughout Washington Week, I listened to the country's decision-makers across various sectors. From Senator John Hickenlooper's hilarious tale of running a craft beer business to Acting Archivist Debra Steidel Wall's honest perspective on her tenure during such trying times, I absorbed much knowledge from many different sources. I cannot forget my awe at seeing the original forms of our founding documents, the exact words from centuries ago that all American public servants are bound to live by. The Senate Reception was also another highlight of the week. I enjoyed speaking with my state's senators, and as I waited, I watched as national figures casually walked past.

On the last day of the program, we honored our nation's service members from the past to the present. Washington Week would not have been possible without our outstanding Military Mentors, who guided us every step of the way. As I prepared to leave the Mayflower Hotel for the last time at 5 am on Saturday, I realized how much I would miss my fellow delegates, whom I was so fortunate to grow with over the week. I learned so much from them, and as we returned to our communities, I hoped we would stay in touch and, hopefully, reunite again through whatever path life took us. After another ten-hour flight, I was home, forever changed by an unforgettable and incredible experience.