

Andrew Dong, IA – 2023

I arrived in Washington, D.C. with excitement and pride. The feeling was surreal: here I was, in our nation's capital not as a sightseer or tourist, but as someone who would be interacting with the top politicians and leaders of the United States. Ever since my first public service experience in my freshman year of high school, I had dreamed about the opportunity to be a changemaker at the national level - I was looking forward to experiencing the next step in my public service journey. However, it was throughout Washington Week that I discovered what truly mattered was right in front of me.

As I heard from the intelligent and powerful leaders speaking before us - imparting their wisdom upon our youthful and eager minds - a common theme struck out to me. Every single one of them - from Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley - told their stories with a certain air of humbleness and a significant amount of respect toward their individual upbringings. Rather than focusing on their current positions and careers, they spent the bulk of their time reflecting on the past. All of them highlighted the importance of how they were raised, their initial experiences in public service, and how it shaped who they have now become.

However, out of everything that I experienced throughout the week - ranging from hearing the Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Sonia Sotomayor to meeting my senators Joni Ernst and Chuck Grassley - it was my fellow delegates who made this week special. Never before had I been surrounded by such service-centered and selfless leaders, and our daily interactions were the sources of the greatest learning experiences of my life. To describe their impact on me throughout the week in one word would be *inspiring*. Just being around them inspired me to realize just how important of a role youth can play in leading our country.

I entered Washington Week hoping to catch a glimpse at what it was like to be a change-maker and leader on Capitol Hill. I wanted to take my experiences from the United States Senate Youth Program and apply what I learned from the high-ranking politicians and leaders of our country towards my future endeavors.

But, although I learned very much from the speakers and politicians, it was my fellow delegates whom I learned the most from. Each and every single one of them are the present and future of the United States, and it was an honor to be in their presence and experience their commitment to service and leadership. They inspire me even after the program has concluded, and I know that they will continue to do so long into the future.

Thus, I left Washington Week with a yearning fire to apply my newly gained knowledge and insight within my own community. Inspired by my fellow 103 delegates, I hope to cultivate and develop new relationships with like-minded individuals in my city and across my state, working together to serve our community and bring about change and progress - this is my own background and upbringing that will shape who I become. I know that my foundation in public service is here and now. One day, I will be ready to take my efforts and leadership to the national level - maybe even in Washington, D.C. But as of now, I am proud to champion the issues and ideas of my state. Of my city. Of my school. Of my community.