

## **Esha Bolar, IA – 2023**

As a participant in the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), I had the privilege of experiencing an array of once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.

One of the highlights of the program for me was meeting and talking with Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. It was a truly inspiring experience to hear her personal story that emphasized the importance of hard work, perseverance, and compassion.

Another unforgettable moment was touring the Pentagon and meeting with the Joint Chief of Staffs. It was an honor to have the opportunity to see the inner workings of one of the most important institutions in our country and to learn from the experts who help keep our nation safe.

The United States Institute of Peace was also a beautiful experience. The serene surroundings were a welcome contrast to the hustle and bustle of the city, and the speakers were all incredibly insightful and inspiring. We heard from experts in the fields of conflict resolution, human rights, and diplomacy. They shared with us their experiences working to promote peace and understanding around the world, and emphasized the importance of creating informed dialogue.

Eating dinner with the Constitution and Declaration of Independence was another unforgettable experience. We were taken to a beautiful hall in the National Archives, where we were surrounded by the documents that form the foundation of our country. It was a powerful reminder of the values and ideals that America was founded on and the responsibility that we have to uphold them. We were reminded that these documents are not just historical artifacts but living symbols of our democracy and our commitment to freedom and justice.

Throughout the program, the guidance of the Military Mentors was one of a kind. They emphasized the importance of leadership, teamwork, and selflessness, and challenged us to consider how we can best serve our communities and our country. As a future Marine, I found their mentorship to be a highlight of the program. Along with this, was the opportunity I received to lay the wreath at Arlington Cemetery. I was overcome with emotion and honored to have been able to partake in the sacred ceremony.

In reflecting on the overall experience, I am struck by a few key quotes that really resonated with me. The Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed told us that "history is not static." This was a powerful reminder that the world is constantly changing and evolving, and that we all have a role to play in shaping its course. Senator John Hickenlooper emphasized that "there is nothing more essential to democracy than trust." This quote really stuck with me and powerfully demonstrates the importance of building relationships and maintaining the marketplace of ideas. Thus, in order to build a stronger, more just, and more equitable society, we must be willing to listen to one another and work together in good faith. The Secretary of Education, Michael Cardona, urged us to "be unapologetically you." This quote was a reminder that we should be proud of who we are and use our strengths to make a positive difference in the world. Finally, the U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, detailed, "strength is about our willingness to be kind." It is only by working together with a spirit of generosity and compassion that we can build a better world.

Overall, the United States Senate Youth Program was a transformative experience that will stay with me for the rest of my life. All 104 of us were unique and had our own stories and experiences to share. I've found new life-long friendships thanks to USSYP. Most importantly, I came away from the program with a renewed sense of hope and optimism for the future. I believe that each of us has the power to make a positive difference in the world, and I am committed to doing my part to build a brighter, more just, and more equitable future for all.