

Anusha Nadkarni, IL – 2023

Last month, I had the privilege of representing Illinois as one of two delegates to the 61st annual United States Senate Youth Program. I once thought that the experience of receiving my “Congratulations!” email from the Illinois State Board of Education, confirming my selection as a finalist, would be the most exciting moment of my life – I was soon proven wrong.

From early morning rendezvous to late night speeches, each day was jam-packed with adventure, knowledge, and a new perspective on government. Deep in the heart of our country, in institutions like the Capitol, the White House, the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Pentagon, and the Supreme Court, I shared the incredible opportunity of “Washington Week” with 103 other delegates who strive for a more perfect union each and every day. While we often think of government as fixed and unchanging, my experience in Washington, D.C. taught me the opposite – our government is a living, breathing entity. It is impressionable, and will grow to reflect the actions, conversations, votes, and dreams we feed it. As I move forward in my life, I carry with me the significance of good-faith collaboration, mindful patriotism, and the essential complexities that make up our nation; I remember that only these values will allow America to grow into the equitable and free country it was designed to be.

I am grateful not only for the opportunity to represent my wonderful home state of Illinois, but also to experience public service at the deepest and most engaging level. Hearing from accomplished individuals like Senator John Hickenlooper, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, among others, reminded me that every change-making individual started somewhere. Oftentimes, this “somewhere” is a home, school, or community – a relatively mundane place colored by the conceptions of our passions and dreams. While Washington Week was filled with valuable lessons on bipartisanship, lifelong learning, and putting faith back into our self-governed nation, it was also a needed reminder that greatness blooms where we plant it. Regardless of the college we attend, families we come from, and futures we expect to fulfill, our ability to make great change is rooted in the intensity of our drive. Public service is not solely about holding public office – it is also about reflecting on our “somewhere,” and using that as a foundation on which to build a better future for our communities.

In her closing statement to my class of delegates, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor said, “I know that someone will take over for me, and I know it will be someone like you.” As I move into college, law school, and beyond, I know that I will face challenges to my faith in our nation’s institutions; this is the nature of a country founded on patriotic dissent. I also know, however, that my week in Washington, D.C. has equipped me with the connections, mentors, and drive to continue hoping: hoping for a future of collaboration, a country that is united in respect, and a republic that does not fear diversity of thought, speech, or identity. Surrounded by the people who are now my best friends and biggest inspirations, I am certain that we will work towards making these hopes absolute. As is the natural order, someone will take over for every President, Secretary, Supreme Court Justice, and Congressperson. The future is bright because that “someone” will be someone like us.