

James Stratton, LA – 2023

Maybe Politicians Really Aren't So Bad

Being a member of the United States Senate Youth Program has been one of the greatest honors I have ever received. During Washington Week I gained experiences and friendships that I will benefit from for a lifetime, and I could not be more grateful for the opportunity I was given to participate in such a prestigious and respected program. Throughout the week, every speaker and event we attended provided invaluable insight and knowledge into the inner workings of our government, however there were certain ones that stuck out among the rest. One event that I will always remember was hearing from General Mark Milley in the Pentagon. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is one of the most powerful people in the government, and the chance to personally hear his perspective on current issues such as tensions with China and the war in Ukraine was incredible. Not only that, but seeing this man, who has more power and respect than many people could ever dream of, talk about mental health and the well being of his soldiers really moved me. It made me think about how even the hardest people on earth are still people, and even the top brass in the U.S. Army is no exception. The general was also quite funny and personable, making the experience even more enjoyable.

The event that stuck out to me the most has to have been getting to speak with Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. Education is an issue that is near and dear to me, as I have seen first hand disparities in education quality not only within school districts, but even between different programs within single schools. Hearing Secretary Cardona speak about the importance of quality education for all was very moving; he even had me considering becoming a teacher one day, a thought that I have not been able to shake since that morning. However, the greatest part of our meeting with Secretary Cardona was that I was given the opportunity to ask him a question relating to my education experience. Hearing the opinions of the highest-ranking education official in the nation on a matter that has had a major impact in my life was incredible, and the experience only furthered my passion for education.

Washington Week was a time of immense learning. Between the speakers and other delegates, our own beliefs were challenged and reshaped in ways many of us had not experienced before. The overall experience of the 61st annual Senate Youth Program left me with a newfound admiration and respect for lawmakers. Going into the week, I held a belief that politicians were all crooked, and that none of them could be trusted on either side of the aisle. But, as the week went on and we interacted with more and more politicians like Senator John Hickenlooper and Senator Shelley Moore Capito, I slowly had my perception of politicians changed. After hearing them speak I realized that, like General Milley, politicians are people, too. They are just other humans with human emotions and human flaws. And, naturally, they will make mistakes just like everyone else. That is the most valuable thing I could have learned during Washington Week. The experience as a whole was absolutely invaluable; it truly was a once in a lifetime experience. I hope that I will one day use the things that I learned and the connections I made to make my own impact on our nation and the world, and someday I will be able to change someone's life just as mine was during the United States Senate Youth Program.