

## Alexandra Tokar, MA – 2023

In a world where partisan divisions threaten to tear America apart and inequalities seem to pervade every aspect of its citizens' lives, my goals of creating change were not generally well received. *What's the point? Do you think **you're** going to solve racism? What do **you** think you can do about it?* As a politically active teenage girl, I heard it all. I was told I was naive, idealistic, out of touch with reality, too young to know what I was talking about. People felt entitled to their judgment of my goals and superior in their opinions of my abilities. I never knew how to formulate an answer to these questions. When my options were to give up, to accept that society was doomed and I was helpless to create change or to try, my path seemed obvious. I couldn't bring myself to accept the alternative. To condemn myself to living with the belief that the world would never change for the better was beyond my capabilities. My future career in public service did not appear to me as a choice but a necessity.

It was when I was sitting in the Supreme Court, leaning in to listen to every word Justice Sotomayor said that I truly heard the thoughts I had grown up with about public service put into words.

"At a time like the present, how do you maintain hope for the future of the Supreme Court and America?" a delegate inquired. The room was silent as 103 teenagers waited for a response to the question they, like me, had been asked their whole lives. Justice Sotomayor answered us with a question of her own.

"What choice do I have? If I don't try then change is impossible. I don't have a choice."

Justice Sotomayor's words have stuck with me. They represented the first time I realized I was not alone in my belief that living in a world where people did not try to create progress was unbearable. For the first time, I saw that my perspective did not make me naive or irrational, but a public servant. Throughout the week, I saw this parallel between every speaker we heard, from Secretary of Education Cardona who warned us of the dangers of complacency, to Soledad O'Brien who recognized that her role as an informant of the people meant promoting truth and communication rather than furthering partisan division for personal benefit. However, what I noticed above all was the presence of these sentiments among my fellow delegates. 103 of the most driven, passionate, and capable young people from across the country, I was surrounded by those who were refusing to be told that their visions were impossible. I met teenagers dedicated to reforming the education systems that have furthered socioeconomic disparities for centuries, despite common beliefs that students should not be involved in decisions in this field. I met teenagers who had stood up against discriminatory policies that would deeply impact the LGBTQIA+ community, even when they were told young people had no power to do so. Every single one of my fellow delegates had gotten to where they were because they had refused to take no for an answer. They had refused to be told that they were incapable of fostering change, that our country was incapable of fostering change. I saw leaders who didn't see patriotism and service as simply accepting the state of our country as it is, but as believing in what it could be.

Now, as all of us return home to our respective states, we do so with an answer to the question we have been asked our whole lives. Why? Why care, why try? It is because all of us have determined we have no other option. So, we choose to push the boundaries of what people believe youth can do. We choose to believe in our country's capability for change, in our own capability to be catalysts of it. We choose to look forward and speak up rather than stay stagnant and silent. We choose to serve.