

Natalie Emmerson, ME – 2023

The feeling of finding “your people” is hard to describe; of encountering individuals who, after a brief conversation you reflect, “Wow. This is someone I could go through life with.” That is the community I found at the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP).

Entering a room full of intelligent and accomplished people is often intimidating and the urge to compare oneself to others can be difficult to resist. However, from the first conversation with our Military Mentor groups, it was clear that my fellow delegates, many just as nervous as I, were there to learn.

At a time in our nation when the very pillars of our democracy are being tested, hope and bipartisanship were central themes of the 2023 US Senate Youth Program. The energy with which all of the delegates and Military Mentors approached the week was electrifying.

As participants of the U.S. Senate Youth Program, my fellow delegates and I had the privilege of learning from a truly diverse group of individuals who prioritized representation of diversity and inclusion and strengthened my pride in our nation.

As we sat in a room at the Russell Senate Building early Monday morning, I quickly scanned my phone, attempting to glean as much information about Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough as possible in the few minutes remaining before she entered the room. I had spent the previous night mulling over a dinner conversation with my roommate and had forgotten to research our speakers for the day ahead. Nothing online, however, could have prepared me for the chills I experienced as Parliamentarian MacDonough walked us through her experience on January 6th.

We sat in silence as she answered the question, “What keeps you inspired to continue your work in the Senate amid growing partisanship?” With a description of her staff, who saved the ballots during the attack on the Capitol Building on January 6, 2020, Parliamentarian MacDonough cited their bravery as her reason to keep fighting. As she and her staffers ran for their lives that day, they saved our democracy.

This act of bravery was the first of many we had the privilege of hearing about firsthand and the theme of unsung heroes developed further as the week progressed. While at the Department of Justice we had the opportunity to meet the woman responsible for prosecuting the police officers who killed George Floyd. At the National Archives we learned of the death threats Archivist Debra Wall received for doing her job. In General Mark Milley, we encountered a leader who stayed true to the Constitution in the face of immense pressure.

This theme of courage and integrity was encapsulated by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who, when asked how she retained hope and persevered through trying times, replied simply, “What choice do we have?”

This is not to say that our experience was dominated by an air of solemnity; Washington Week was full of excitement. I am unlikely to forget the experience of running through the basement of the Pentagon in flats, under strict instruction *not* to exit the stairwell at the mezzanine level, as we rushed to meet General Milley. Nor will I forget Senator King’s unexpected Yoda joke during the Senate Reception: “What did Yoda say when he saw himself on TV for the first time? HD am I.”

In the years to come, however, my fondest recollections of the United States Senate Youth Program will be the conversations I shared with fellow delegates and our Military Mentors. I will never forget the thrill of explaining the rules of Quidditch while eating dinner in the Rotunda of the National Archives or geeking out about technologies developed by NASA during breakfast at the Mayflower. While not subjects with a seemingly close relation to public service, there is a joy that comes from listening to people discuss topics about which they are truly passionate. If I could only use one word to describe the conversations I had during USSYP 2023, that word would be passionate.

Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona advised us that the best way to preserve different cultures and celebrate our differences is “to be unapologetically you.” Not only did I love learning from the people of USSYP, who inspire me and strengthen my faith in our democracy, I loved who I became around them. I became, unapologetically, me.