

## **Olivia Serio, MI – 2023**

As I boarded my plane to D.C., after power outages and blizzards in Michigan, I felt a sense of excitement and anticipation. Once I landed, I caught glimpses of cherry blossoms beginning to bloom and buildings with a richer history than many other places in the U.S. Walking into the Mayflower that first night, I felt the weight of the city settle around me and it was incredible. Soon after, I met someone who I will consider a friend for as long as she'll have me, Kara Dugan. In the days leading up to the program, I felt nervous. I asked myself would I make friends, would I find direction for my future career, and would people care what a girl from a small town in Michigan has to say? Kara Dugan immediately made all of those worries disappear. Whenever anyone asks me what were the most meaningful aspects of the program, I always tell them the delegates who surrounded me, especially my roommate, Kara. Never have I been in a more driven, talented, accomplished, and kind group of people, and I doubt that I will again. The empathy and duty my fellow delegates felt to making the world a better place truly inspired me and helped strengthen my resolve in the potential of our generation. Kara and I instantly hit it off. I seriously could not have asked for a better roommate and I hope I have a college roommate next year with a similar authenticity, thoughtfulness, and killer sense of humor to Kara.

Another impactful part of Washington Week was the array of incredible speakers we were able to hear from. When I found out we would be able to hear from senators, Soledad O'Brien, and possibly even meet President Biden, I was floored, but I was more surprised by how impactful the speakers whose names I did not recognize were. One favorite of mine was the Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough. The Senate Parliamentarian was an incredibly strong person who spoke about her experiences vehemently sticking to what is right, even in the face of adversity and hate. During the questions and answer section for the Senate Parliamentarian and the Secretary of the Senate, both were asked the part of their job that gets them through the difficult days and both answered that their staffs were their rocks. The Senate Parliamentarian then told us that her staff got the electoral ballots out of the Senate on January 6<sup>th</sup> and it sincerely brought a tear to my eye, with similar situations happening when speaking with the Department of Justice prosecutor who prosecuted Derek Chauvin in George Floyd's death and the U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. All people that were not elected, not involved in politics, and not receiving enough thanks for the work they have done to serve this country.

The speakers I heard from during Washington Week changed my life. While I no longer want to work in politics, I have never wanted to work in public service more. After hearing from the speakers at the DOJ, I stepped outside, called my dad, and told him that was what I wanted to spend my life doing. I can never thank The Hearst Foundations and the United States Senate Youth Program enough for the inspiration and a look at the side of government work that does not involve elections. I would be lying, though, if I did not say that meeting General Milley, Justice Sotomayor, and one of my personal heroes, Michigan's own, Senator Debbie Stabenow, were experiences I will never forget.

Last, but absolutely not least, I need to take a moment to highlight the Military Mentors who I met during Washington Week. My own Military Mentor was amazing. A kind and compassionate person with a clarity in the shining brightness of our futures, Major Nelson was the kind of person who had an endless reservoir of empathy. She made my week seamless, exciting, and enriching. I hope to keep in contact with Major Nelson for years to come. Another Military Mentor who made an impact on me was Major Hollister. Major Hollister and I somehow ended up eating at least one meal a day at the same table. Major Hollister reminded me a lot of my mom back home, mirroring her kindness, honesty, and quick wit. From engaging in difficult conversations over dinner to cracking jokes at the White House, I feel very lucky that I was able to spend time with Major Hollister and I hope he could be a mentor in my future.

I would not give up my experience during Washington Week for anything and I will never be able to thank The Hearst Foundations and the United States Senate Youth Program enough. I hope to emulate the values of the Hearst Foundations, all of the Military Mentors, and my fellow delegates in the future by giving back to my community and my country. I will never forget the lessons I learned over Washington Week and I will cherish the friendships and personal growth I experienced because of this program. If I can say one thing, it is thank you to the United States Senate Youth Program. Thank you for the memories, thank you for the laughs, and thank you for giving me a chance to represent my state and make my voice heard.