

Joshua Bowman, MS – 2023

“It’s one America.”

When I boarded my humble flight from Jackson–Evers Airport, I couldn’t have possibly imagined quite how significant a mark the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) would leave on my approach toward life. Everything, from the consistently insightful exchanges between delegates to the uniquely prodigious roster of speakers to the magnificent sights and sounds of our nation’s capital, made the week a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience. And, everything brought to the forefront of my mind the power of putting aside our differences to make change. While often vague and superficial, the freedom of individuals to come together and make change is the idea that makes our country worth preserving. The USSYP, with the helpful eloquence of Senator John Hickenlooper, reminded me, “It’s *one* America.”

Like many, I at first felt unworthy of being placed with 103 other delegates with such impressive stories. However, those concerns were immediately swept aside by our very first speaker. Bayan Galal perfectly commenced the experience, not only prompting me to make the most of my time and my journal but also putting aside my imposter syndrome to have real conversations with my fellow delegates. Whether during bus ride chats, in between fabulous dinner courses, or before bed with my roommate, I was always thoroughly entertained by the differences between and unique features of the states. The words we used, the weather we bore, and the cultures that defined us, all varied greatly. But, what impacted me the most was the common drive to improve our communities: address homelessness, educational inequality, or clean up our environment. These conversations highlighted a theme of finding common ground which so defined this year’s program. Our Military Mentors were constantly facilitating exchange between delegates that cemented the takeaways from each day and were an invaluable part of the coming-togetherness that was so prevalent throughout the week.

The sheer quality of each and every presentation of the program’s schedule is indescribable. I was reassured by the emphasis on the value of nonlinear paths of Senate Secretary Ann Berry and Senator Shelly Moore Capito. I was inspired by the unmatched modesty of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor and her message that we are the future. I was inspired by the wonderful charisma and storytelling of Acting Archivist Debra Wall. But in an era so defined by political polarization, partisan gridlock, and vicious campaigns, Senator John Hickenlooper’s address perhaps best summarized our experience at the USSYP. His unique story and personality gave him a unique perspective on the current atmosphere of Capitol Hill. Hickenlooper’s business background allowed him to analogize the disastrous impact of mudslinging, saying, “We are diminishing the entire product group of democracy.” His words gave hope for practical progress in a time when compromise is unheard of. It made those conversations between delegates so much more significant because after all, as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Kristen Clarke put it, “It’s up to [us] to determine which direction we will go.”

I'm an unashamed history buff, so one can imagine just how excited I was upon receiving the 2023 USSYP schedule. The packed days made my year. My only complaint about the program is that we didn't have more than twenty-four hours in a day to fully enjoy everything the sites had to offer. Visiting Mount Vernon may seem like a sleepy start to the week, but learning how our first president lived and made course-altering decisions was extremely insightful. The Kennedy Center reminded us of the high place of the arts in the history and values of a nation. When supplemented by a fantastic journalism luncheon with Soledad O'Brien and a Department of Defense presentation, these visits lent a focus on all aspects of the inner workings of the United States. Simply existing in the U.S. Capitol, a place where so many compromises were made and significant acts were signed, was something I'll never forget. Simply existing in the presence of a sitting justice or my own two senators made serving my country in such a principal way seem possible.

I can't say the USSYP left a permanent mark on my life. I can't, because I know it has done so much more. It's changed how I strive to find common ground, gain takeaways from others, and learn from history. I made lifelong friends and unforgettable memories. I can't ever express my appreciation enough to those who make the program possible.