

Nadia Hardin, MS – 2023

My time during the 61st annual Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was one of growth, connection, and inspiration. As someone interested in politics, Washington Week was an amazing opportunity to get a first-hand perspective of public service on a federal level.

Initially, I was nervous coming into the program. Our speakers talked with us on a wide range of issues in which we were able to offer questions and comment. Though many of the topics interested me, I was timid in voicing my thoughts and opinions. Luckily, one of our first speakers, Bayan Galal, spoke heavily on imposter syndrome and feeling out of place during the program. An idea to which I related, making me feel more at home at the program. Furthermore, as I began to talk more with my peers, I began to feel more confident.

As someone with a considerable interest in international relations, I found our visit to the U.S Institute of Peace particularly impactful. Having the opportunity to speak with not only Senior Program Officer of the African Center, Nicoletta Barbara, but also the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of European and Eurasian Affairs, Derek Hogan, on matters of foreign policy gave me an outlet for my curiosity. My time at the Institute of Peace was the spotlight of my trip, and was key in helping me find my stride in USSYP.

During my time in D.C., I was also able to meet with the senators from my state of Mississippi: Cindy Hyde-Smith and Roger Wicker. They were both present at the Senate Reception and were more than willing to answer our questions about serving as Senators. I'm frankly grateful to them for taking the time out to converse with us on a wide range of topics. They encouraged us to pursue our interest in public service, and made themselves available to us if we ever had any other questions. During the reception my co-delegate, Josh Bowman, and I were also able to meet a Senate Youth alumnus who had represented Mississippi. He now works in Roger Wicker's office, and we were able to compare experiences and ask about his journey in and after Senate Youth.

My fellow delegates in the 61st Annual Senate Youth Programs were some of the smartest, kindest, and most loving people I have ever met. My roommate, Ella, and I would have late night conversations, recapping our favorite experiences of the day and picking each other's brains on the issues most important to us. Our Military Mentor group grounded us on not only our schedules during Washington Week, but also lessons that we should carry wherever life leads. The bonds I made are substantial, and I'm grateful to this program for bringing me closer with such a brilliant group of people from across the country.

One of the most impactful parts of Washington week was the Q&A sessions. In one of the most anticipated sessions, we were able to visit the U.S. Supreme Court and speak with Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor. Beyond discussing her time on the Court, she pushed the importance of asking questions and being open to widening our understanding, saying, "If you are afraid of being embarrassed, then eventually your ignorance will embarrass you." The week was full of inspiring speeches, but this message was uniquely impactful, encouraging us to overcome our anxiety to be able to fully take advantage of our experiences.

In this Olympics of public service, as Program Director Rayne Guilford put it, we learned not only from our leaders, but each other. The connections we made, experiences we had, and the learning we fostered made this the opportunity of a lifetime and cemented my dedication to public service.