

Lily Miller, MT – 2023

As I flip through the note-filled pages of my United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) journal, memories emerge from the enthusiastically scribbled entries of Washington Week. I remember the feeling of warm, strong coffee easing down my throat as I listened to inspiring breakfast speakers. The amazement I experienced each time my mind stole away (for a brief second) from a world-renowned change-maker to look above me, my gaze resting on the intricate architectural ceilings of our government buildings. However, the strongest memory I have of Washington Week is profoundly simpler than that. It is the memory of hope. My USSYP mentors, peers and experience have instilled in me a hopeful feeling, a gesture so elementary that one might tend to trivialize its importance, but it is important that we do not.

The Cambridge English dictionary describes 'hope' as a noun meaning the desire for something to happen, or to be true. However, I prefer the archaic definition of hope - the feeling of trust. My USSYP experience nurtured my trust and admiration for our government institutions and the champions who lead them. Our government processes are the backbone of our nation and I trust in the work and goodwill of our leaders, this is what I bring home to my Montana and educational communities. In addition, my fellow USSYP delegates are shining examples of dedication and openness to listen and lift the voices around them. If one thing is certain, I have so much trust in the USSYP generation that our future is strong. We face complex challenges as a nation and as a global community, but since the beginning, our foremothers and fathers' belief in promise and resilience has provided the blueprint to guide us. As the U.S Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, Kristen Clarke shared, "A tiny ripple of hope," this is what motivates you forward. For me, my USSYP peers are a hope-tsunami.

On our final full day of Washington Week, we took a bus to the Pentagon. The Spring air was cool, and it nipped at my cheeks. Arriving late, we sprinted through the twisted hallways of the Pentagon and out of breath, we arrived at a small auditorium. As we settled into seats, delegates casually talked with each other about politics, our futures, and quirky hometown traditions. There was a buzz of anticipation in the air; our Military Mentors straightened their ties and brushed off their uniforms like anxious high schoolers at prom. Then, General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, walked in. His presence quieted the room and the buzz settled. He spoke to us about the importance of knowledge, education, and hard work. He asked us for courage, both physical and in our moral core. Lastly, he called on us, as emerging leaders, to remember the Constitution in our future paths. A document he has sworn to protect for the majority of his life. General Milley's dedication inspired me to keep faith in the interrelationships of our legislative, judicial and executive processes. Although this can be hard at times, things that are worth anything often are. The United States of America is a government constantly striving, "to create a more perfect union," and in this I will bring courage of character as General Milley inspired us to do.

When listening to Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Sonia Sotomayor, speak I found true connection. She shared a parallel belief to mine - that we are "all fundamentally good people" and "must understand that viewpoints are developed by our personal values and not ill will." She told us to accept the goodwill in each other. A guiding principle of mine is the belief that everyone is born innately good and it is life's challenging circumstances that dim this light. When following politics from grassroots school board meetings to the national stage, polarization and thinking of dissenting views as the 'other' is highlighted in our news cycles. As a delegate from geographically rural Montana, I have not had a lot of first-hand exposure to federal government processes. From so far away, I did not see that common human connection within it. Through participation with the USSYP, I was able to see goodwill taking place all around me, it may look different than my own perspective, but it is good and unwavering will.

Across rank, jobs, political parties, and state boundaries USSYP speakers and delegates highlighted the importance of engaged young people. This was illustrated when my USSYP New Hampshire roommate, Maddy, posed an insightful question to the Librarian of Congress. It was demonstrated again, when Shawn from Maine, regaled the group in a rousing parody of our week's highlights. Engagement was everywhere, in our laughter, our deep conversations, our dreams for the future. Engagement in the diversity of delegates who dared to stand on the stage and share why they wanted to represent us at the closing remarks. As delegate after delegate went up the applause for each other grew. As we face problems that grow infinitely more complex, it is easy to feel the daunting challenge of climbing that mountain. However, when we pause and look around at the capability of our fellow travelers/climbers, the path seems easier. Each of us is armed with a unique set of skills, tools and background to conquer each summit. It is in my peers that I place my wholehearted trust. As a delegate from Montana and climber of mountains, I know and I will tie my metaphorical safety line to the delegates of USSYP, because it's in them that I find courage and hope for our beautiful and striving country. It has been the honor of my young lifetime to represent Montana as a delegate at the 2023 United States Senate Youth Program.