

Jude Reece, NC – 2023

The U.S. Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was one of the greatest weeks of my life. Hearing from America's top elected and appointed officials, chatting with my co-delegates, and meeting for accountability with my Military Mentor, Captain (now Major) Sansbury, I could truly envision for myself a future of public service.

The adventure of Washington Week started long before my flight touched down at Washington Reagan National Airport. In the months before the program, I'd excitedly open Instagram and navigate to the @ussyp2023 profile page run by Will Nelson (ND-2023) to start learning about my fellow delegates. I was intrigued not only by our level of commitment to social change and student representation, but also by our apparent shared affinity for Taylor Swift and U.S. Senator Cory Booker. These things came into play during Washington Week via a selfie-taking spree with Senator Booker at the Senate Reception and the USSYP-inspired parody of "You Belong With Me."

Regarding speakers, the highlight of the program came when U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona gave an address on the future of schooling. Hearing his experiences as a teacher and principal in public schools meant a lot to me as someone who has proudly attended public schools my entire life. I was especially inspired by his vision of what our school system can be. He emphasized to us that a sense of urgency is crucial to creating positive change in student outcomes across the country. The quote that sticks with me is "The greatest threat to our education system is complacency." I plan to live by his words as I move forward.

I also really enjoyed the trips to the Department of Justice and to the National Archives. At the Department of Justice, we heard from a Civil Rights Panel and Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke. I was captivated by Attorney General Clarke's responses to our questions and thrilled when I had the chance to ask one of my own. Through our visit, I saw that the DOJ is fighting in courtrooms across the country for many of the issues I care most deeply about. The day got even better that afternoon when we were welcomed to the National Archives by Acting Archivist Debra Wall. In addition to answering questions about classified documents scandals, she spoke on the Equal Rights Amendment and the Electoral College. She brought a much-appreciated sense of humor to her work, even indulging questions about the JFK Assassination (though no conspiracy was revealed).

Just as important as the official speaking engagements were the conversations I had with my co-delegates, especially my roommate. We talked about everything from China-Taiwan relations to affordable healthcare solutions. I also learned a great deal about other delegates' home states. Through these discussions, I realized how unique the United States is among nations for its wide array of regions, cultures, and experiences. I'm left with both a renewed commitment to the democratic ideals promoted by America's founders and a strong desire to visit Rhode Island and try coffee milk.

Ultimately, Washington Week was an eye-opening experience that I'm beyond grateful to have taken part in. In just seven days, I learned from dozens of guest speakers, filled my journal with nearly a hundred pages of notes, and connected with 103 of the nation's most talented young leaders. I'm extremely glad to have attended the U.S. Senate Youth Program, and I'm tremendously appreciative of the numerous role models that took the time to address us during the program week. I hope that my reflections have at least come close to capturing the outstanding effort and commitment to public service demonstrated by our guest speakers, our Military Mentors, the members of the U.S. Senate, The Hearst Foundations staff, and my co-delegates.