

## **Madeline Waters, NH – 2023**

In all honesty, I had no idea what to expect when landing in D.C. this March. I knew getting selected for the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was one of the greatest honors of my life, but very little about what the experience would entail. A week later I could confidently say that it was the most educational, moving, exciting, tiring, and fun week of my life.

Upon arriving I quickly realized the caliber of both my peers, our Military Mentors, and the speakers we would hear from. The other delegates are a diverse group of confident, kind, leaders and we all made fast friends. It was easy to bond with each other because despite coming from all over the country, and world, we all agreed on the importance of our involvement in our country. We discussed the differences in each of our states, but consistently found more similarities. I'll be the first to admit that I was initially intimidated by all of the Military Mentors. After only a few brief interactions with them I realized how kind, knowledgeable, and funny each and every one of them are. The experience would have been unrecognizable without them, and I am grateful for the lifelong connections I have created.

What really shocked me was the extent and impressiveness of each of the speakers that granted us a piece of their time. From our opening speaker, USSYP alum Bayan Galal, to the two delegates that gave our final keynote speeches, each had a unique, interesting, and moving take on the world and our government. Librarian of Congress Dr. Carla Hayden spoke of the importance of access to free and unrestricted information in libraries. Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed discussed the ways history changes as we take the time to truly study it. Senator John Hickenlooper, Senator Shelly Moore Capito, and Senator John Thune emphasized the importance of bipartisanship in moving toward a better future for all. Acting Archivist Debra Wall explained the difficulty of a nonpartisan position being forced into partisan issues. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona touched our hearts as students while he shared the importance of rejecting complacency in our own education. Supreme Court Justice Sotomayor highlighted one message: don't be a bystander. There are more speakers with more impactful messages than I could ever hope to fit in an essay. Each of them had a unique perspective on the United States, its government, and the way we interact with the rest of the world.

There may be one thing that I value out of this experience more than any other. Hope. The state of the country, and the world, can too often feel like a lost cause. I expected to hear more of the same rhetoric in the capital. In reality, I left every speaker feeling more hopeful and excited for the future than ever. Hearing peoples' practical ideas was inspiring, undoubtedly, however ideas did not instill hope in me, passion did. Each speaker had a passion for public service, and served in their roles to leave the United States in a better position than when they entered them. Seeing people with unadulterated passion for their work helped me realize that as long as we continue to fight for our futures we have hope of finding better ones.

Washington Week was the best week of my life. I am eternally grateful for all of the people in my life, and the New Hampshire Department of Education, for helping me reach this remarkable opportunity. I am also grateful to The Hearst Foundations and the United States Senate for creating an opportunity unlike any other. I will continue to remember and reflect on this experience for the rest of my life; it has forever changed the way I view our government, politics, and country for the better.