

## **Morgan Casey, NH – 2023**

People often experience a moment that changes their life. I imagine it is easy to describe that split second when everything changed. However, after Washington Week, I do not think a moment is sufficient. What if it was a week? What if it was a combination of many moments that come together to alter someone's life? My week at the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) was a transformative experience that changed my life, and I am honored I had the opportunity to participate in this program.

As incredible as the next seven days would be, my week didn't start as expected. On the day of departure, a storm dropped eight inches of snow overnight, and I woke up to an alert on my phone notifying me that my flight had been canceled. Though I was worried I would miss the first day, the USSYP travel agent quickly arranged different flight plans. A few hours later, I arrived at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, getting picked up in what I can only describe as a "Secret Service-like" SUV. Immediately upon arriving at the Mayflower Hotel, I tested negative for Covid-19, and the whirlwind began.

Washington Week was full of adventure! On the first night, we met our Military Mentors and small group members. My Military Mentor, Major Remoshay Nelson, was an outstanding ambassador for the Armed Forces and an inspiration. She is the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds' first black female officer and greatly enriched my knowledge of the Air Force as well as what it means to serve our country.

The next morning, Chief Judge Robert Henry spoke with us, sharing valuable wisdom, witty humor, and book recommendations. I definitely need to read *Enlightenment Now* by Steven Pinker. We later visited George Washington's historic home at Mount Vernon and toured the Kennedy Center. We explored the Supreme Court, where Justice Sotomayor told her story and advised us not to be afraid to ask questions and seek help when needed. I can say confidently that the delegates had no shortage of questions during the Q&A session after her talk.

We watched the Color Guard perform and ate lunch at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). At USIP, President and CEO Lisa Grande spoke about the importance of diplomatic initiatives in the midst of global conflicts. We had dinner at the National Archives, which was one of the most unique things I have ever experienced. I will never forget dining in the presence of our nation's freedom charters - the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence - in the rotunda of the U.S. National Archives. We listened to television anchor Soledad O'Brien speak and attended a Senate reception at the Russell Senate Office Building. I was fortunate to meet both of my New Hampshire senators and get a selfie with Senator Cory Booker from New Jersey.

Later in the week, we toured the National Memorials on the Washington Mall, proceeded through three security checks to enter the White House, had breakfast with the Surgeon General and U.S. Secretary of Education, toured the Pentagon, and laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. The delegates and I listened to a performance by the U.S. Army Band Brass Quintet, followed by the flag ceremony on the final night after dinner.

During Washington Week, there were police escorts, five-star dinners, desserts that looked like the Capitol Building, and VIP entrances to every event. The various speakers shared their stories - the path to their position, information about their careers, and advice to the future generation. Secretary of the U.S. Senate Ann Berry spoke and encouraged us to appreciate the journey, not just the destination. She spoke passionately, saying the journey is what life is really about - the circumstances, people, and experiences you encounter along the way. I also heard ideas from our speakers expressing the importance of teamwork, staying positive and flexible in difficult situations, and betting on yourself. The piece of advice, however, that resonated most to me was shared by U.S. Senate Parliamentarian MacDonough. She said, "changes are not setbacks; they are opportunities for growth." This advice was a great reminder to not give up in the face of adversity. Many of our nation's leaders faced obstacles in their careers, whether it was a lack of opportunity, discrimination, or limited financial resources. However, they took those opportunities to grow and create change. Hearing firsthand accounts of the challenges and triumphs of public service reinforced my commitment to making a positive impact in my own community. I volunteered to pack school supplies to help give back to No Kid Hungry, a nonprofit organization working to end child hunger in America, and on the final night, USSYP hosted a dance. It was an enjoyable way to end the week with my new friends.

Every day was jam-packed with incredible events and speakers, and it's hard to believe that none of them were the highlight of Washington Week. By far, the best part of the week was meeting the other 103 outstanding student delegates. As someone who lives in a relatively small community, it was eye-opening to meet students from all corners of the country and learn about their experiences and perspectives. Through small group discussions, I was able to form meaningful connections with these individuals and gain a greater appreciation for the diversity of our nation.

Every night at dinner, I would learn about students who had received full scholarship offers to college, started nonprofits, and worked on political campaigns. One delegate in my small group was the student body leader of student council programs in Maryland, another individual had raised over \$200,000 for charity, and several others had become Coca-Cola Scholars. It is impossible to be unchanged when you meet people like this. All 104 delegates, representing every state in our country, the District of Columbia, and the Department of Defense, have done amazing things in their young lives. I am so grateful to have met them, and I cannot wait to see how we will shape the future of our country. I am so thankful to The Hearst Foundations and the New Hampshire Department of Education for allowing me to be a part of the 61<sup>st</sup> annual United States Senate Youth Program. Overall, Washington Week was a transformative experience that broadened my horizons, challenged my assumptions, and deepened my commitment to public service. I look forward to carrying the lessons and knowledge I gained as I continue to pursue my future endeavors.