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In the few weeks since the end of the 2023 United States Senate Youth Program, I have reflected on my incredible time in Washington, including the impressive and inspiring guest speakers and fascinating, historic locations we visited. When we first arrived at the Mayflower Hotel on Saturday, Ms. Rayne Guilford described Washington Week as “the Olympics of public service.” While I wasn’t quite sure what she meant at that time, I now look back to my experiences over that surreal week and realize that she couldn’t have described the program in better words. The Olympics are a display of people who are the best in the world at what they do performing at the highest possible level. This is precisely what Washington Week is all about: bringing outstanding students from every state in the country together to witness the reality of public service through the people who do it best. These people are educated, intelligent, dedicated, and honorable individuals who have spent their lives pursuing public service, the advancement of justice, and the upholding of our democracy.

The most impactful moments of the week were a mixture of highly anticipated speakers and surprisingly profound conversations that I did not expect to have. One of the most long-awaited speakers of the week was Justice Sonia Sotomayor and hearing her words and being in her presence exceeded every expectation I had. I was beyond impressed by her incredible wisdom, especially the arduous process of deep, contemplative thought that she employs to reach each decision she makes. The way in which she described the great responsibility she has as a Supreme Court Justice and the immense hope she has for the future of our country were among the most striking words I heard all week. Another incredibly inspiring moment from Washington Week was visiting the Department of Justice and hearing from a panel of people who worked in different capacities at the DOJ. While their jobs may be less well-known in comparison to Justice Sotomayor’s, hearing them speak about their work has stuck with me just as strongly as Justice Sotomayor’s words have. I particularly remember and appreciate their candor about current issues facing our country, including threats to voting rights and civil liberties. Learning about the work that they do every day to ensure justice is upheld across the United States has encouraged me to follow in their footsteps and advocate for justice in my own community.

Much like learning from Justice Sotomayor and members of the Department of Justice, Washington Week as a whole blew every expectation I had out of the water. The quality of the people that I met, including my fellow delegates, the Military Mentors, the program directors, and the speakers, is unlike anything I have ever been a part of. Each person that I spoke with imparted a slice of wisdom to me, and I will keep each memory and piece of advice that I received with me for the rest of my life. More than anything else, the numerous examples of selfless service that I witnessed every day during the U.S. Senate Youth Program have motivated me to keep striving to lead a life dedicated to service and the upholding of democracy.