

## Grace Wei, NM – 2023

“Delegates and distinguished guests, dinner is served.” Those iconic words still ring in my ears when I think back about the experiences of the 61<sup>st</sup> United States Senate Youth Program. In what was called the Olympics of Public Service, it was the community of the other 103 delegates that made me feel at home. Stepping foot into Washington, D.C. for the first time with the most dedicated student leaders across the country, who aspired to solve our generation’s most pressing issues, filled me with excitement for the future. In a country of political polarization, I was glad that talking points were moved away from partisan divide, but rather bringing us together in making a difference. Through the conversations held at late dinners with Capitol dome desserts and early breakfast buffets, I felt inspired by my fellow delegates to keep asking questions to understand the complexities of the American socio-political landscape.

In the warm and cozy Supreme Court, the lessons taught by Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor will forever be embraced. She taught us the difference between ignorance and stupidity, and how stubbornness doesn’t allow you to give until you have created change. Her insights on what seemed to be negative characteristics on the surface had been transformed to characteristics that lead to success. Justice Sotomayor encouraged us to ask questions because if we are, others most likely will be too. These lessons were motivators that led us away from being bystanders; we were the future leaders and today’s action takers. That was the message that all 104 delegates needed to hear - being a bystander doesn’t get anything done.

The words “keep making New Mexico proud” and “make a positive difference every day” are signed on the back of my delegate notebook from my two senators, Senator Martin Heinrich and Senator Ben Ray Luján. It was an honor as a constituent to be able to speak with my senators about the issues pressing our state with my co-delegate - for them to give us advice about being public servants in the government, to their favorite foods in downtown Albuquerque, made a long-lasting impression on me. They had transparent answers to all the questions - questions about polarization in the country, to what they do on a day-to-day basis. It felt as though I had a true connection to the wonderful senators that represent me in the government. As a young person inspired to serve in the U.S. government, it was encouraging for my senators to recognize the accomplishments and appreciate the thought of young people in our state.

A quote from General Mark Milley stood out to me and I didn’t truly understand why until now, where I’m sitting at my desk typing out my thoughts. It goes, “if you forget your fellow man, you are a hollow individual.” Without the mentors and role models that inspired me to get to where I am now, I would not have had the opportunity to be on this path of growth. As I represented the Land of Enchantment with my co-delegate through the experience, my relationship with politics and public service grew stronger as I bonded over those shared ideas alongside the 103 other delegates. After Washington Week, I cannot forget the Military Mentors that guided us throughout the week, offering their endless advice and insights. I am forever grateful to have been able to meet such wonderful and inspiring delegates along with the most influential speakers from across the nation and the globe. This experience has taught me more than I could have ever imagined and has empowered my journey of public service. I leave the program with a whole new world of understanding as a leader and action taker today, filled with passion dedicated to my community.