

Austin Choi, OH – 2023

March 4th, 2023: it's the first day of the 61st annual US Senate Youth Program

I text my co-delegate Keshav: "Are you here yet?"

Little do I know that this next week will be filled with 102 other multi-talented, kind, and unique individuals. From delegates passionate about international affairs to people wanting to study the ever-growing intersection of STEM and policy, each and every delegate that I have talked to is passionate about something.

When you gather 104 youth leaders from all across the nation, there is bound to be invigorating discussion. As I write this essay almost a month after Washington Week, I can safely say that I still talk with my roommate and have "friendly" debates (we are tied 2-2 right now in our debate series). With technology connecting our group, I'm sure we will continue to meet each other in the future as we serve in our own unique ways.

A lesson especially well learned through these discussions is as follows:

"If you're afraid of being embarrassed, eventually your ignorance will make you embarrassed."

It's also a quote from Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who spoke with us during Washington Week. This alone was an experience of a lifetime. As you make your way to the courtroom, you find a wooden bench to sit on. The room is hushed, and the only sounds are the quiet whispers of the other delegates. The large, ornate bench where the justices sit is in the center of the room, and behind it hangs a crimson velvet curtain with gold tassels.

You take a moment to appreciate the impressive details of the courtroom. The walls are paneled with walnut, and the bench is covered in red velvet.

As you take it all in, you start to feel a sense of awe and reverence for the physical and historical beauty of the Supreme Court and its role in shaping American history. You reflect on the countless landmark cases that have been decided in this very room.

And then Justice Sotomayor arrives. We were instructed to rise and show respect, but when she approached from afar, there were murmurs. "Is that her?" And as she grew near, it was clear.

It was *the* Justice Sotomayor.

But the best part was yet to come. Learning firsthand how down-to-earth she was and the messages she shared with us were the highlight of my week.

From General Mark Milley to Senator John Hickenlooper, different speakers had different strengths and talents, but the outcome was the same: teaching by using their experiences. And as high schoolers, it is essential that we have these experiences because it is through learning that we will become the leaders of tomorrow.