

Aditi Mangal, PA – 2023

The United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), to me, was and continues to be the epitome of unity, selfless service, enlightenment for our nation's youth, and passion: pillars integrated into every moment that was seamlessly strung together in the seven days of the Washington Week experience. I will cherish my learning as I move forward in my path rooted in my passion for public service and leadership.

From the first day itself, meeting fellow delegates and Military Mentors at Reagan Airport and engaging in icebreaker games at the Mayflower Hotel, to the very last, where we bid our surely temporary farewells, these pillars formed the backdrop for our friendships, and also allowed for us to be so enriched from our interactions from meeting inspiring leaders of our country. Our unified passion to serve our country, which was contributed to by our diverse experiences, was omnipresent in our discussions during morning Mentor group meet-ups, coach bus rides, and dinner, whether it be served in the Grand Ballroom, or next to the Constitution in the National Archives. I learned not only from our Military Mentors, distinguished guests, and our nation's top leaders, but also from delegates who have become close friends, proving USSYP is, as Ms. Rayne Guilford mentioned, the Olympics of public service, where we all exist to empower each other to our fullest.

Along with serving as the foundation of interactions, these pillars can also be seen in their pure form as they have been unleashed in my USSYP journaling notebook, where the valuable words of wisdom shared by Honorable Justice Sotomayor co-exist with my personal reflections from each day, sketches of the fundamental institutions our nation has been shaped by, and the parting wishes of my fellow 103 delegates. My notebook is also adorned with both drafts of questions I was honored to ask Secretary of Education, Dr. Miguel Cardona, Senate Parliamentarian Ms. Elizabeth MacDonough, and the Librarian of Congress, Dr. Carla Hayden, as well as their invaluable responses. Their respective identities as trailblazers, the first in their respective paths with their unique stories of diversity to guide our nation solidifies the fact that each individual has their own "superpower," as Secretary Cardona shared. What I found most interesting was a common quality shared by the life experiences of each eminent leader who spoke to us: their persistence and ability to build their platform to the position at which they stand today, proving that a goal can serve as a guiding beacon of light even in times when it may be dark.

The USSYP symbolizes a torch being passed down from the generations that have carefully preserved our government and the words of our forefathers to our very own. It has served as the reminder that the future is truly in our hands, and it is our responsibility to remember the words of wisdom of our leaders in times when the light of democracy may seem to flicker. Hearing the valuable words of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley and Colonel Ramón López Colón personalized this notion, and truly left me with a renewed perspective. In discussions with delegates, the importance of acting upon pressing issues was reinforced. However, I am more assured than ever that together, we, now bound by the shared experience of the United States Senate Youth Program, are more capable than ever to become changemakers in not just our country, but the world.

Washington Week also brought many firsts for me as an individual. I never expected to share a smile with the Librarian of Congress, sharing my love for the scent that paper books bring. Nor did I anticipate sitting in the Supreme Court of the United States, the institution that contains deep roots of our nation's history, with Justice Sotomayor's hand placed on top of the ledge of the seat I was in. I never expected to share some Spanish that I have been learning with Secretary Cardona. Each day, I would remember that I would be experiencing and creating memories with figures my history textbooks described. USSYP allowed me to do just that.

I haven't been able to stop myself from reliving the experience in rewinding memories, and I know I won't ever, as the United States Senate Youth Program is truly the experience of a lifetime. I would like to express my gratitude to The Hearst Foundations and the United States Senate, all Military Mentors, and speakers, as all of you prove that our government is the tapestry of multiple stories, multiple perspectives, and multiple generations coming together and working towards a common goal rooted in the people. I also thank the entire USSYP family, as we have now become, for making Washington Week so incredibly special.