

Claire Chi, PA – 2023

Thirty days have passed since the 61st United States Senate Youth Program and I remain astonished by the vivid picture it paints for possibilities in our country's future. My reflection on this picture begins with a hallmark of the Washington Week experience: the Senate Youth notebook. After having traveled from Mount Vernon and the National Archives to the Department of Justice and Institute of Peace, it now provides a treasure chest of wisdom and inspiration for my own journey in public service.

The footnotes of my USSYP notebook reveal a recollection of several amusing moments during Washington Week: we learned Aussie slang from Australian Ambassador Suzanne McCourt, dashed across the Pentagon halls to meet the nation's highest-ranking military officer, and earned odd looks from passersby as we were followed by camera crews on hoverboards. Among the most memorable experiences of my trip to D.C. was visiting my senators in the Russell Senate Office Building. I had the honor of meeting Senator Casey and expressing my appreciation for his years of devoted service to Pennsylvania. Speaking with the United States Secretary of Education was an equally special experience. As he shared his vision for American public education, Dr. Cardona expressed the hope he had for us to be future leaders. I immediately saw Senate Youth reflected in that hope.

Besides speaking with prominent public officials of our nation, I met 103 of the world's most promising changemakers. In the moment of interaction with them at breakfast, during bus rides, and in the Grand Ballroom's door frame, we were united as Do-ers. Our initiative through servant leadership gives evidence that there is a powerful force for positive impact in the world. Perhaps most outstanding was that the delegates knew their "why." In any conversation, I noticed their impressive knowledge of sociopolitical history, connection to personal heritage, and passion for community engagement.

There was also a certain enthusiasm surrounding public service that energized me with hope. After seven days of constant inspiration from the nation's highest-ranking government officials and distinguished student leaders, it was so easy to feel confident in America's future. When discussions at the dinner table were centered around addressing today's most pressing issues—food insecurity, geopolitical conflicts, and disparities in public education systems to name a few—the fears I held closely about them began to dissipate. Our interactions encouraged us to develop stronger leadership philosophies and visions for the future we will create one day, together.

There is no doubt that Senate Youth is the most inspiring place I have been in my life. But I am reminded by Secretary Cardona that we must fight complacency. Now scattered across the United States and abroad, we have the responsibility to not only be impactful leaders but also to empower others to create their own waves of change. Leadership is a "we" effort. We live in the status quo; let us challenge it and be the next to lead it.