

Dominick Lombard, RI – 2023

My greatest honor was serving as one of Rhode Island's delegates to the United States Senate Youth Program. I joined the brightest, funniest, kindest, and most thoughtful group of 104 students and future leaders from every state, Washington, D.C., and the Department of Defense Educational Activities. I could not have imagined a better week learning about the United States, meeting with government officials and elected leaders, and understanding more about our country through every delegate. Every day I discovered more about our country through my fellow delegates, creating lifelong friendships as we walked through the halls of Congress, explored the Capitol, sat in the Supreme Court, toured the Pentagon, and paid respects at Arlington National Cemetery, among a jam-packed schedule of events.

Public and community service have always meant so much to me, but meeting so many like-minded people who held both similar and different philosophies and perspectives on what that meant for them was life changing. We all can make change in different ways and places: I would never have imagined meeting a fellow Rhode Islander working for the Australian consulate or immediately resonating with General Mark Milley's New Englander personality.

I found home throughout my trip. After the first night, I joined my new friends for breakfast, and a sudden sensation of "home" swept over me. I knew that pursuing a career in public service and the people I would meet along the way would solidify my feelings of purpose to represent Rhode Island in the future. As I toured the Capitol, I was again taken with the notion of home. I was standing in the home of our nation and government, reflecting on this honor while thinking about the different people who called this country and land home before it was designated as such, home for centuries, and how that connected to me. I know I will learn and grow into the change that will make this country, state, and town a home for anyone and, at the same time, work to understand why that sense of home has been compromised for myriad reasons. A home built through thoughtful discourse and tolerance, not sameness or uniformity. A home built to uplift the next generation, not fall through division. We are a rich tapestry of people and experiences, and I want to ensure that this tapestry is not just a flag we tout for clout, but a symbol of this home we call a nation woven from reconciliation, love, and unity. I will learn to ensure progress and fight for the community I love and care about, cementing my passionate desire to not only shift but transform, making intentional and thoughtful changes to this country we hold dear so that anyone can call this nation home.

Everything I saw and everyone I met inspired me and assured me that the future of the United States is strong and hopeful. That means that we all have a responsibility to serve each other and our country how we individually see fit. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor emphasized this point when she met with us, saying, "If you don't try, you don't have a choice."

I am so lucky to have met this incredible group of people who are already changing the world by making change in their communities and states, with many of us eyeing a 2040 White House bid or hoping to succeed our states' United States Senators that we met. Though Senator John Hickenlooper, our Democratic Co-Chair, relayed a quote Kurt Vonnegut once told him that a "truly terrifying moment is when you realize that the people you went to high school with are running the country," resulting in an eruption of laughter from all the delegates.

I will forever remember and cherish this transformative week as well as the delegates and distinguished guests of the 61st Annual United States Senate Youth Program.