

## Sheerea Yu, TN – 2023

On the first night, Bayan Galal (USSYP, CT - 2019) gave us advice—journal about every day. What did you learn? What was surprising? What was meaningful?

Starting with the traditional tour of Mount Vernon, I found the most meaning in the people I was with. As we visited George Washington's tomb, I thought about how someone with enough force and leadership in life could still pull people's attention over 200 years later, even after death. It was a fitting beginning to the week because I could feel that in all of us—the desire to make that type of history, to be the change, vibrating in the air around us.

A surprise note was how much I loved the Kennedy Center. I found it summed up well by JFK's quote: "The life of the arts, far from being an interruption, a distraction in the life of the nation, is [rather] the center of a nation's purpose." YES. My soul felt so full from our short tour—the statues, the art, the chandeliers, the flags, the concert hall, the President's Box!

I was also greatly heartened to hear from the Senate Parliamentarian, Elizabeth MacDonough. It was her team who ushered the ballots out of the building during the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, and who finished counting them at 4 AM. Here was someone in Washington who was integral to the running of our government—yet managed to be bipartisan, contribute behind the scenes, and be unflashy in the best way. I really appreciated that.

And here we go: how can I not mention the person who I am sure will appear in 104 essays? There is no one in the world like Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, with her leopard print shirt, and her endless quiet wisdom, which she shared like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"We're all afraid of showing weakness," she said. "Of saying 'I don't know,' of embarrassment. But if you're afraid of being embarrassed, one day your ignorance will embarrass you."

And when asked "what gives you hope? What motivates you to keep going, for the Court and for America?" Justice Sotomayor said, "What choice do we have? If we don't try, change is impossible. Don't be a bystander—don't get hit by a bus."

And I also have to say, walking out, seeing Justice Ginsburg's portrait on the wall facing Justice Scalia's, I was truly awestruck by the weight of that building. Had I really just visited the chamber which contained the people, past and present, who had altered the direction of our country so many times?

The Department of Justice continued our foray into the judicial system. There, we heard from a panel of lawyers, one of whom was Samantha Trepel—prosecutor on the George Floyd case. It was fascinating to hear about how she had to adjust her approach to the case because of social media, as well as the pressure of her bosses getting to follow her every move live on Twitter. But most of all, she gave me hope that it was indeed possible to pursue a career in law without succumbing to the broken system—that it was still possible to fight for civil rights from the inside, and win.

As someone who is bilingual, it was also especially lovely to hear Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona recount a moment he shared with three other Latino Cabinet members. As they were waiting to speak with the president in the Oval Office, they were just chatting in Spanish—in a pinch-me moment, he remembered being a child and not understanding English or American culture at all. But here, his differences were his strengths, and bilingualism was a superpower.

And on the topic of the power of language, both the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address brought me to a quiet reflective place as I stood there reading both documents inscribed into the high stone walls of the Lincoln Memorial. It was a moment of contemplation that I really needed amidst the glitz of the overall week. So beautifully written. So powerfully delivered. The complicated history of our country is not something to shy away from—rather, we must face it and grapple with it.

Finally, I resonated with Soledad O'Brien's story about her path to journalism. She gave us valuable advice: search for the class that is more than checking boxes. The class that you think about all the time, that you feel you can contribute something new to—that you know you will not rest until you have accomplished that thing.

That's exactly how I felt over the course of Washington Week. I'm meant to be here. To pursue how much farther there is to go, and tackle all the work there is left to do. And I also realized that although everyone we had the honor of meeting throughout the program was so different, they all had that same drive and determination. I looked around at all of the delegates, and I saw that shared conviction reflected there too.

The goodbyes were so hard at the end of Washington Week, but I felt such a quiet confidence that it wouldn't be a forever goodbye for us—not to Washington, and not to each other.