

Jena Mahoney, UT – 2023

It was the night before the state United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) competition, and I was nothing short of terrified. I remember voicing my fears to my mom as we scrutinized my wardrobe for something business-casual to wear. I felt entirely underqualified to represent my school, and I was sure I would make a fool of myself. But, despite my worries, I allowed myself to hope and competed the next day. When I received a letter announcing I would represent Utah as a 2023 United States Senate Youth Program delegate, I was shocked, ecstatic, and hopeful.

Hope. It's a funny thing, really. Hope implies confidence with little certainty. I believe hope is not a naïve belief that everything will be fine, but rather an embrace of the unknown. Hope is trust, expectation, and action. And hope is exactly what I found at Washington Week.

From the moment I entered the Mayflower Hotel, I was in awe. I had expected to be greatly intimidated by the 103 other delegates, but I quickly discovered I had no need to be. Yes, they were without a doubt the most accomplished and intelligent people I had ever met, but they were also unfailingly kind, passionate, and thoughtful individuals. It is a privilege to call them my friends. They have given me every reason to have hope for our nation's future. When U.S. Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough spoke of the January 6th Capitol riots, she cited hope as the reason she returns to work each day. I was able to experience a small portion of that hope during Washington Week. From the inspirational remarks of Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona to the late-night conversations with my roommate, every interaction filled me with pride for my country and hope for its future.

When Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor was asked how she retains hope and presses forward through difficult times, she plainly responded, "What choice do we have? If you don't try, you don't have a choice." I don't think this statement will ever leave my memory. As Mrs. Rayne Guilford told us, hope is a muscle. We gain hope by choosing to believe in a better future for our nation, and by working each day to make that future a reality. In short, we gain hope by hoping. And I don't just hope for great things anymore – I expect them. Justice Sotomayor advised us to not just be bystanders. We can either choose to get on board the bus or get hit by the bus. I have chosen to board the bus with my fellow delegates, to fight for a future of freedom and equality.

When I look back to the night that started it all, ranting to my mom in my bedroom, I am beyond grateful I decided to board the bus. I have always hated goodbyes, so it was a shock when the end of Washington Week came and I wasn't heartbroken. My heart was too full of gratitude, insight, and a desire to do better. I am eternally grateful to the USSYP directors and staff, The Hearst Foundations, my fellow delegates and distinguished guests, and our wonderful photographers Jakub Mosur and Erin Lubin for the unforgettable experience of Washington Week. Thank you for giving me reason to hope.