

## Lara Mohamed, VA – 2023

Washington Week turned even me, a DMV native, into fangirl mode as I experienced Washington, DC with a fresh pair of eyes. By meeting many of our nation's top leaders, I began to see DC not only as a city of history but of history-makers and the various people that make it up. I found out about this program in my freshman year and was finally able to participate in my senior year. The program description does not do this life-changing experience enough justice. I would have never imagined that I would be taking a photo with Senator Cory Booker or learning so much about the military from my amazing Military Mentor Major Holli Nelson. I would not have dreamed of the moment when my hands shivered as I introduced Ambassador Hogan in the breathtaking room at the United States Institute of Peace. This week provided me with resources to continue to develop my voice and learn about our nation's political system.

Immersed in a fascinating, smart, supportive group of delegates, speakers, and distinguished guests from across the nation, I was filled with hope. I was reminded that while the fight to make the world a better place is never easy, it is through countless times of not taking no for an answer and getting back up after failing that we can make a difference. Standing two feet away from me, Sonya Sotomayor said, "Change is only possible when you try." While the 103 delegates and I try every single day for our communities and our generation, Washington Week provided us with a unique opportunity to enhance our leadership skills so that we can become better "try-ers." By learning from each other, we challenged ourselves to think more deeply about the societal issues we work so passionately to solve. Although we competed a little too hard for "best state title," we embraced our diversity of backgrounds and experiences, which helped us learn about the complexities of our nation's biggest issues. While staring at each other in awe as we cracked our white chocolate Capitol domes to reveal raspberries on the inside, eating dinner together with the Constitution, or sitting on Bus 3 as we were escorted by the police to the Supreme Court, we engaged in discussion about various topics from education, global politics, gun-violence prevention, and healthcare.

Engaging in discussions with my fellow delegates made me realize the importance of respectful bipartisan conversations. Rather than looking for someone to change their entire mind, our duty should be to encourage others to think in a more open-minded manner about the inequalities that exist within our society. I will carry these conversations with me for my entire life. As our nation's Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, told us, "We do not stop being our unique selves even after we become successful."

The highlight of Washington Week was hearing from phenomenal speakers ranging from members of the President's Cabinet to Senators, military leaders, Judges, and the Librarian of Congress. Every one of our speakers was transparent with us about the issues they hope our generation will be brave enough to tackle and each enriched us with career and life advice. While laughing over his role in a movie, Senator Hickenlooper explained the importance of bipartisanship and strengthening his own campaigns rather than launching attack ads. Hearing from our nation's history keeper at the National Archives, we learned the importance of following the political process and removing bias in positions of power. Secretary of Education Dr. Miguel Cardona compared the failing of a child to a plane falling and advised us to showcase our values through our actions. Through where we spend our time, "[We] can be the root that helps others grow." The United States Surgeon General encouraged us to prioritize community, reminding us that "If you want to go slow, you go alone. If you want to go fast, you go together."

Together, we become the next pioneers and history-makers. United, we raise voices for those that are often left in the cracks of the system and support underprivileged communities across the country. As the Senate Historian told us, "The history I learned yesterday is constantly being redefined by the history I learn today."