

## Lauren Solimano, VT – 2023

My breath is taken away as I approach the Supreme Court building. The towering white marble structure stood tall and proud against the clear blue sky, its columns and arches reaching up toward the heavens. As I step through the door, the ornate marble floors, intricate carvings, and towering ceilings reflect the warm glow of the grand chandeliers hanging above. The hushed silence, punctuated only by the occasional murmur of voices or the sound of footsteps, adds to the solemnity of the atmosphere. My jaw dropped as I walked through the grand doors, leading us into the courtroom. My eyes were immediately drawn to the embellished ceiling, adorned with intricate signs of justice. I shuffled in and sat on the dark wood bench, watching in awe at the beautiful artwork and intricacy of the room. And then, from the corner of my eye, I saw her. Justice Sonia Sotomayor in her bright cheetah print cardigan walked into the courtroom. I was struck by her warmth and approachability, despite her formidable reputation. Upon greeting us she spoke with passion and conviction, making it clear how much she believed in us as future changemakers. I sat in awe as I listened to the woman who has risen to the highest levels of power and influence in a field typically dominated by men, speak to a group of eager high school students. And then she said something that stuck with me. "Don't just be a bystander," she said. "You either get on board the bus, or you'll get hit by the bus."

These words were a call to action, a reminder to all of the student delegates that we have a responsibility to stand up for justice. They were a reminder that it's up to us to decide whether we want to be passive observers or active participants in shaping our country's future. Justice Sotomayor's words embodied that spirit of activism and commitment to the cause of justice that Washington week as a whole represented.

As we embarked on the Olympics of public service I refueled my passion for public service. This week opened my eyes to how I can better advocate for my community and country in a new light. I had the incredible opportunity to immerse myself in the political and cultural heart of our nation, meet with political leaders and scholars, and connect with other high school students who shared my passion for public service.

This truly transformative weeklong experience was most memorable in the smallest ways, such as gathering around for delicious meals, sharing stories and experiences with others, and listening to current policymakers. As I sat around the dinner table with my fellow delegates each night, we shared much more than the bread. We discussed everything from current events and personal experiences to engaging with our Military Mentors about their lives and careers. These conversations challenged me to think more deeply about my values and beliefs and to consider how they might shape others in my community. Overall, it showed me that despite our differences, whether that might be geographical location or political views, we all share the common goal of trying to better our nation for future generations. The United States Senate Youth Program refueled my spirit for public service and made me optimistic about our nation's future in the hands of future trailblazers.