

## **Maddie Ahmadi, VT – 2023**

Before arriving in Washington, D.C., I knew that all my United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) co-delegates had accomplished big things. However, I didn't realize that it would be in the little moments throughout the Washington Week where I would come to fully understand their brilliance. These moments, no matter how small, made a difference.

Immediately upon landing at Reagan airport, delegates met their Military Mentors, boarded large coaches, and sat together, shoulder to shoulder, awaiting everyone else's arrival. To most, a bus full of "strangers" would seem intimidating. Thankfully, due to social media, the delegates didn't seem like strangers at all. Prior to the program, one delegate decided to create a USSYP 2023 Instagram account. The platform served as our pre-Washington Week networking vehicle. We conversed, bonded over a shared appreciation for Taylor Swift, and perhaps stalked each other's 'favorite politician' Q&A responses. The account was a monumental icebreaker, that to some may seem minute, but was truly a critical element of our program.

One afternoon we had the privilege of meeting with Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. To be in her presence was overwhelming and inspiring. While inside the Supreme Court, photographs are not allowed. This presented a challenge for many delegates who wanted to capture the once in a lifetime opportunity. In an effort to commemorate meeting Justice Sotomayor, many delegates had their notebooks carefully placed on their laps and beautifully sketched various impactful moments throughout the meeting. The images were vivid and clear -- a picture worth a million words. Thanks to the creativity and talents of my co-delegates, I will remember to use my own, unique and personal strengths, and to think outside the box, when solving a problem.

On our final night in the Mayflower ballroom, Ms. Guilford described the ancient Athenian education style, Paideia. The system encourages the mind, body, and soul to work equally as hard. USSYP is modeled after this philosophy. As I reflected back on the week, I came to appreciate how valuable it was to have my brain working as hard as my body. Even more than that, the connections I fostered, much like our opportunities, were unmatched. The format of Washington Week allowed time for laughter, exhaustion, joy, intellect, and connection. It was truly the most fulfilling experience and the honor of my life.