

## **Claire Michal, WA – 2023**

Immensely, infinitely and insanely grateful is one of the first things that comes to mind when I reflect on my United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) experience. I am so honored that I was able to share a space with and get to know the most amazing group of people: from my 103 other delegates to the Military Mentors, USSYP staff, and of course, the speakers. Every single person I met was insanely intelligent, and talented but most of all just a good human. I am so thankful that Washington Week will forever be something that I can point to as a moment that changed how I think of myself and my path in life. When I first found out that I was a delegate, I had a suspicion that it would be an impactful experience. What I didn't anticipate was the ways and extent to which it would impact me, all of the lessons learned and the questions posed. All of that impact is a direct result of the conversations and interactions I had with my fellow delegates, Military Mentors, and speakers.

Throughout Washington Week we met with some of our Nation's greatest leaders including Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley, and many more. Although the speakers had a wide variety of perspectives and subject matters two main themes emerged for me. The first was embracing the journey and the twists and turns of life. Nearly all of the speakers at some point touched on how their path to where they are today wasn't linear, and that they hadn't all initially planned on pursuing the career they have. The message many of them left us with is to allow life to surprise you, and to take advantage of the opportunities in front of you because you don't know where they might lead. As a person that has a habit of thinking of life in a linear fashion this message resonated with me; particularly hearing this message from people who are so accomplished, and who I would so happily emulate. The second theme that emerged is the importance and value of service. This is not so surprising as service lies at the heart of this program as a whole, but all of the speakers emphasized the necessity and responsibility of living lives of service. I think General Mark Milley summarized this sentiment well when he told us something akin to "Above all else live a life of service, because if you do not serve others then you are ultimately a hollow man." The necessity of service is something shared amongst every person we meet during Washington Week. For me, it reaffirmed that no matter what path I take in life it will be one of service to others.

In addition to meeting our country's current leaders, I also had the pleasure of meeting 103 of our country's future leaders and current changemakers in communities across the world. That I was able to share a space with this group of people for a week was truly one of the greatest delights of my life. I spent a lot of that week in awe of each and every one of you. I am so grateful to everyone that I talked to, met, and received advice from. You all are some of the most intelligent, accomplished, and passionate people I have ever met, and you are a testament to what I think our generation is, a force of unapologetic change full of potential for good. All I really want to say is thank you, getting to meet you all has been and will continue to be one of the greatest joys of my life. I can't wait to see all of the good you do and all of the change you inspire.

Finally guiding us throughout the week were 17 of the most talented, accomplished, and good humans from all six branches of the military. Going into Washington Week the Military Mentors were a bit of an unknown for me, I had never really interacted with the military before USSYP so I didn't really know what to expect. Through meeting the mentors, the conversations we had, and the experiences we shared they raised new questions and changed and expanded my thinking. This ultimately was the most impactful part of the week for me, and honestly, that impact is something I have struggled to articulate. We hear and repeat the phrase "Soldiers live and would die for our country," but it's a phrase we often treat passively. We repeat it, we literally understand it, but we don't often actually consider what it means. Through my conversations with our Military Mentors and our experiences throughout the week, I began to understand that phrase on a deeper level. I have always been a very purposeful person. I look for meaning in everything I do, and for a long time, I have had a self-prescribed meaning in life. Needless to say, I have spent some time thinking about what I live for but until this trip, I had never truly considered what I would die for. This has been the biggest change in my thinking, considering the meaning of that phrase as two distinct questions. They are distinct because what you live for has the illusion of time, it's your chance at life, and it has the ability to expand and change. On the other hand, what you die for is final, it is what you would give up that chance for. Look around at your life, the people in it, the experiences you want to have, and your dreams, and consider what you would give it all up for. That is the greatest question that this experience left me with, and I don't know what my answer is quite yet. What I do know is, going through this week with the mentors I began to digest exactly what military sacrifice means - because their answer to that question is our country. They would die for and walk in lockstep with people who they have never met all for a belief and hope in a nation and in us. The mentors, the conversations we had, and the questions raised, have truly changed how I will compose my life and for that, I am infinitely grateful.

At the end of the day what I am left with is still immense gratitude for this program, and thank you feels inadequate but it's the only thing left to say. Thank you to all of the USSYP staff- Mr. Cox, Ms. Guilford, and Ms. DeSmet just to name a few - for all of the organizing and work to make Washington Week possible. Thank you to Jakub and Erin for capturing so many amazing memories. Thank you to all of the speakers for taking the time to invest in us and for setting the standards of what public servants should be. Thank you to my fellow delegates, for our conversations, laughs, and smiles and for all of the good you are going to do. Thank you to our Military Mentors you have forever changed my perspective, and how I will compose my life. USSYP has been the most rapidly impactful experience of my life and though I have probably said it a dozen times in this essay it still doesn't feel like enough so, thank you, thank you, thank you!