

Fiona Lu, CA – 2023

Embarrassingly, if you had asked me three years ago who the Governor of California was, I'm not sure I would be able to answer you. Up to late in my high school career, I had always been rather apolitical, ignorant to the deep implications political issues have on every aspect of our lives. Little did I know that in my senior year of high school, I would be privileged and lucky enough to share the same room and the deep wisdom of Justice Sotomayor, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, and General Mark Milley, just to name a few.

The truth is, I didn't get involved in public service at an early age because I could never see myself in those coveted roles. Civic engagement was not emphasized in my household due to the unfamiliarity and disconnectedness my mom felt in regards to American culture and politics as an immigrant in her early adult years. Because of that, I struggled with the idea that someone who looked like me and was from my background was capable of truly making substantial change. After hearing all the distinguished speakers at the 61st annual United States Senate Youth Program, I realized that I couldn't have been more wrong.

What was most remarkable to me about each and every one of the presenters was their dedication to servant leadership and their passion for giving back to their communities. Each of them has cultivated their will to public service through their first-hand experiences and their faith in the good of humanity. Hearing about Justice Sotomayor's childhood in the Bronx, where she relied on public housing programs, inspires me to continue my work in economic justice and expanding public assistance programs, in an effort to make sure every child has the potential to succeed like she has. Senate Historian Betty Koed's passion to preserving raw, uncensored Senate history drives me to be more involved in my local push for ethnic studies curriculum and against the movement of book bans nationwide. Hearing the stories of speakers, who I had only previously dreamed of meeting, helped me humanize all of their journeys in public service, and recognize the boundless potential of mine that I still have ahead of me.

Beyond the speakers, I have also had the great pleasure of meeting some of the most outstanding, talented, and driven students involved in political activism in their communities. I had even found out that some of us have crossed paths before in our advocacy, and I deeply admire all the important work they are all doing in their own communities. The power of young people to make a change is unequivocally demonstrated by all 104 delegates at USSYP through a plethora of issues we're collectively passionate about—ranging from menstrual equity to anti-gun violence to education policy. Every question asked by each student delegate was carried out with grace, thoughtfulness, and a profound desire to learn.

Even a month later, the impact that USSYP left on me has yet to decline – as Mr. Cox once graciously said, USSYP is a “once in a lifetime experience,” but I plan on reflecting on Washington Week for many years to come.