

## **Ella Paligo, TN – 2023**

“Never stop spreading patriotism.” It was an answer that was simple yet so complex. This was the last answer to a delegate question during the United States Senate Youth Program for Washington Week 2023. The Pentagon was our final stop amidst a week of outings to places that I had only ever seen in my history textbooks.

Being inside the Pentagon felt beyond surreal just like every other experience we had. We heard from speakers General Mark Milley, Assistant Secretary of Defense Mara Karlin and Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (SEAC) Ramon Colon Lopez. They gave us wisdom, speaking on the importance of compromise and working together with others. They also spoke on the mental health crisis and the work to prevent suicide. Perhaps the most significant aspect was Mr. Lopez speaking about his trials with PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) and depression after spending decades in combat zones. SEAC Lopez's remarks were personal and vulnerable, emphasizing that even the bravest and strongest can be emotional, specifically concerning their experiences with protecting our liberty and freedom.

It was at that moment that a question occurred to me that I felt must be asked. Our cohort had spent the morning at Arlington National Cemetery. As soon as we arrived, we understood the magnitude of where we were before we even stepped foot off the bus. On the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, there is a saying engraved that reads, “Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God.” While the wreath was being laid at the tomb, there was the firing of gunshots in the background. Two families were attending a funeral for a loved one that passed away protecting our country, the most honorable act of glory imaginable. While Mr. Lopez was speaking, I thought of the families at Arlington Cemetery, the four hundred thousand soldiers laid to rest, and our Military Mentors that have made great sacrifices for our country. It was with that information that I formed my question. My hand stayed in the air, and I began to realize that I may not be called upon. As it was announced that there would only be time for one more question, I began to lose hope until Mr. Lopez pointed in my direction. As I stood up, so did the delegate next to me and I realized that he had not called on me. However, after the conclusion of my friend's question, Mr. Lopez asked if there would be time for me to ask my question as well, and I am beyond grateful that he did

I said the following words: “My favorite American ideal is our common appreciation of the men and women serving in the military. However, there is often a lack of action as we see military members struggling with mental health without anything being done to help. How can we best support those that have served and are currently serving our nation?” He paused for a moment reflecting on what I asked. It was then that he responded with one of the most profound statements I had heard that week, “Never stop spreading patriotism.” The answer seemed obvious, although it was something that an entire country of people seemed to forget as we grew increasingly divided. The answer perfectly summarized the entire week of learning and growth that I had the privilege to be a part of. Spreading patriotism means that we fight tirelessly for the ideals of America - equality, rights, liberty, opportunity, and democracy. Each of the speakers throughout the week emphasized this. From U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy telling us, “If you want to go fast, you go alone. If you want to go far, you go together,” to Justice Sotomayor advising us to never let others take control of our lives, but instead demand that we drive the bus ourselves towards justice. The simple definition of patriotism is, “devotion to and vigorous support for one's country,” but it goes much further. It is devotion to fighting for justice and equality in every aspect of our lives and vigorously supporting our country through supporting one another because our Americanism continuously binds us together. Mr. Lopez's words along with Washington Week inspired me to incorporate patriotism into my everyday life because as we love and fight for our country, we can profoundly change and impact it for the better.