

Anika Yadav, IA – 2024

Those who are crazy enough to think they can change the world actually do.

I relived these words of Alum Mr. Brian Kamoie through every breathing moment of Washington Week. My time at the United States Senate Youth Program, from my journey to the nation's capital to the lifelong relationships I formed, was nothing short of empowering.

We were together in the idle atmosphere that shaped the 1776 revolution, powered the civil rights movement, made aircraft fly, and landed people on the moon. A place where discussions, debates, and deliberations could shape the future of millions of Americans and change the world.

Throughout the week, I learned that we are an accumulation of our independent life experiences. However, our purpose is as great as our path. After all, each delegate, mentor, speaker, and distinguished guest found themselves in the same room together not by coincidence or fate but by the decisions and actions they took on their journey.

Interacting with our country's greatest intellects and prominent leaders kindled the sparks in the depths of our eager minds. In this process of reflection, I uncovered a powerful underlying message beneath their titles and responsibilities: the stories of their humble beginnings, the journey to public service, and their hopes for our future. As Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg shared: *the further I got from home, the more important it was that I was from somewhere.*

Following each session, my faith in our nation grew stronger. I was inspired by our speakers' respect for their upbringing and the community that fostered their love of the United States. They had learned to view the imperfections of our nation and its past as an opportunity to continue striving towards a more perfect union that acknowledges our continued growth. It was within these moments of introspection that I found great meaning in the wisdom of General Charles Q. Brown, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: *talent will get you far, but attitude will take you the rest of the way.*

As we aspire for greatness, there lies ahead a need for compromise and grit. I saw these values within my fellow delegates. Our conversations ran wild with passion and empathy—the purest form of energy necessary for our advancement forward. The journey itself will expose us to the surrounding brilliance of our nation's people and the world in which we live; the path of service will act as a guide, pushing our most talented citizens towards excellence and our leaders with such an attitude to shape the contents of our upcoming history books. From the communities and states where we begin, we will find where our purpose lies to become responsible citizens, look to public service with great fulfillment, and focus on progressing forward—together, as one nation.

Upon returning home, I realized that my 103 fellow delegates and I had been—in the words of Representative Emanuel Cleaver—*infected with the disease called politics*. This week fueled our madness with passion, strengthening our belief in the good that still exists. A certain disease that poured pride and hope within each of us in anticipation to one day see our nation surpassing the limitations of polarization and divide. From my time immersed in the energy of Washington, D.C., I may have found a cure; it lies within the greatness of our people.