

Anoushka Lal, IL – 2024

My USSYP experience has been life changing.

I received my finalist email notification driving home from a Chicago Public School Civil Rights Scholars program with my mom and younger sister. Glancing at the email, which began with “Thank you for your interest,” I clicked out of curiosity. To my disbelief, I read the line “Congratulations for being selected as one of Illinois’s delegates for the 62nd Annual Washington Week.” As I read out loud the email to my mom and sister, tears filled our eyes. Now back from Washington Week, I still get teary-eyed, but this time because it's over.

Every detail, no matter how small, contributed to the unique USSYP experience, from enjoying Presidential popcorn at the White House State of the Union Watch Party to discussing deep dish pizza with Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden. I'll never forget singing “Country Roads” with fellow delegates or my coach group’s dance routine of “Party in the USA” by Miley Cyrus. To no surprise, we won the first annual Coach Spirit Award!

However, the cornerstone of Washington Week was the speaker series. We heard from distinguished leaders like President Biden, Supreme Court Associate Justice Elena Kagan, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, journalist Judy Woodruff, and many others. Engaging with them, one message was clear: the baton to lead the country will be passed to our generation. As one speaker, Brian Kamoie, said, “Those who are crazy enough to try to change the world are the ones who actually do.”

Connecting with the 103 other USSYP delegates is what truly reaffirmed this optimism in me. Despite political differences, every delegate formed tight bonds with each other in and out of the Mayflower Ballroom; The program taught me that regardless of background or belief, given the time to synergize, we can come together constructively for our nation. In addition, the 17 on-duty Military Mentors were highlights of the program. I formed a deep relationship with my mentor, 1st Lt. Kate Krolicki, and have remained close to the other delegates within my group, the cheerily self-proclaimed “Super Troopers.”

Like Secretary Buttigieg had told us of his own USSYP experience and going to buy a formal suit for the program with his mother at the mall, I ultimately hope to share my USSYP story with others. I have never been part of a community that has inspired me as much as USSYP has — I am constantly being uplifted by my mentor and fellow delegates to be the best version of myself to this day. As I optimistically look forward to improving America through “service over self,” I will do so with an open heart and a trove of USSYP memories that I'll hold on to forever.