

## Madisen Finch, KS – 2024

### *Did you do everything you could?*

I applied to USSYP without knowing the full scope of the program. I knew that it would bring me to D.C., I knew that I would get a scholarship from it, and I knew that it would be something cool to do that wasn't reliant upon me being from a town in Kansas. I left D.C. with a fever of 103 degrees and a passion for public service.

The politicians were interesting, and the meals were great. Pete Buttigieg made me cry at the breakfast table because he knew exactly what it was like to grow up queer in a community that wasn't accepting of it, and he was standing in front of me, an alum of the event, secretary attached to his name. From the State of the Union watch party at the White House, to Bernie Sanders showing up at the Senate reception, the week I spent in D.C. is what I think about when I think about leadership, when I think about public service, when I think about what I can do for other people. I have never felt as supported, as entranced, as at peace as I felt when I was standing amongst the 62<sup>nd</sup> Annual United States Senate Youth Program delegation.

The memories that stick with me are not the ones at luncheons or dinners – though memorable – nor the official speeches and questioning boards. The memories that stuck with me are the ones that happened in the in-between moments, the ones with people I now call my best friends, the Military Mentors that guided us (and smuggled ibuprofen into the Pentagon for us).

The National Portrait Gallery's salad was the best one I had all week (and I had a lot), and the portraits stuck with me as I moved through the week. Discussions about JFK and Ronald Reagan, the art dedicated to my favorite Joan of Arc, and the numerous paintings haunted with history guided us because they contextualized what we were doing. The conversations that happened in that building provided the basis for a week of friendship, a week that will hopefully stretch into a lifetime.

Our casual night, which brought food I was familiar with and friendly competition, made me understand the people around me. From a guy from Maine who has more experience (and internship opportunities) in politics than anyone I have ever met, to girls from Hawaii who are intelligent and endearing, to a girl from Georgia and a girl from New York, I was surrounded by people who inspired me, and who I aspire to be. Kansas is the dead center of the Midwest, and I was placed in the middle of people who had done more than me, and who I want to make proud.

The Military Mentors, mine and others, were by far the consistent highlight of the week. From my Military Mentor, Captain Weaver, pushing through the flu to guide us and answer our questions, to Lieutenant Eggers with truly unbelievable stories the first night (he saved kids from drowning on his honeymoon!), to Major Duarte and Captain McGurkin. I am a military brat and I have never felt uncomfortable in the presence of the military, but the ability to be surrounded by so many successful and brave people made me extraordinarily patriotic. I wanted to make their sacrifices worthwhile, and the love I have for them will push me forward.

Major Duarte made me cry twice during Wash Week. The first was when he gifted us the story of his life, the story that truly reflects the American Dream and his own determination. I felt humbled by his growth and his generosity, and I will forever hold myself to the standards of kindness he establishes without even trying to. The second time he made me cry was when he gave me his business card. A

less serious event, maybe, but something as simple as that I truly believe reflects the attitudes of the people at Wash Week. Every single person wanted to continue knowing each other, to continue talking with each other, to stay in contact and keep connected. I want to serve my country because of the way Major Duarte serves, I can only hope to do him justice.

The person at Washington Week that reminded me the most of home was not my co-delegate, sorry Tucker, but instead Captain McGurkin. In him I saw my dad and his experience in the military, I saw how he left a rural community to join the military and how it guided his experience in it. The in-between memory that sticks with me comes from Captain McGurkin. On the last day, the last official morning in Washington, we were on our way to Arlington Cemetery. I had been asked to lay the wreath because of my dad's service in the military, and when I told him that he responded with the names of his friends that were buried there. Captain McGurkin gave us a speech I could not do justice on paper, but he gave us two rules to live by. For context, he had told us that we are not indebted for the things that were done for us, but instead for the things that could not be done. He said that this should be the thing we remember when we go to bed, and it should be what gets us out of it in the morning. The love I have for public service comes from this speech, and the work I want to do for other people is embodied in his things to remember:

1. It is not about me.  
and
2. Did you do everything you could?

I plan on doing everything I can.