

Edward Mukalazi, MA – 2024

The weeks leading up to Washington Week were the longest weeks of my life. Anticipation dominated my mind as I couldn't think about anything else. "Will I fit in with my co-delegates? Will I get to meet my senators? Will it go by too fast?"

When I first landed with my co-delegates at the Ronald Reagan National Airport, all of my worries were laid to rest. It felt unreal to be back in D.C. as there is truly something different in the air there. Everyone seems so important, everyone walks with a purpose. When I look back, I recall sitting on one of the coaches, looking out of the window, and just wondering, "How amazing will this week be?" It is safe to say expectations were shattered. Walking into the Mayflower Hotel was nothing short of magical. The golden walls, yea-high ceilings, and glistening chandeliers made it seem more like a movie than real life. The self-serve tacos, which was the first meal of the week, were likely my favorite meal of the whole week, which is saying a lot given the 4-course meals you're served each day. I could feel the privilege of being in this place, the immense responsibility of working in Washington, to hold the future of our nation in your hands.

Dreams turned into reality as on Monday morning, Secretary Pete Buttigieg came to talk about his experience as a Senate Youth delegate, and his current work as Secretary of Transportation. Although it felt unreal, it was insane to think that it was only the beginning. Throughout the week, by asking Justice Elena Kagan questions in the Supreme Court, talking about state and national politics with Senators Elizabeth Warren and Ed Markey, and meeting the president of the United States, I saw our government work in real-time. I found that history is not something that occurs passively but rather is actively shaped by the decisions of real people. This was something that I couldn't get over, that these people were actually real! This alludes to something that Secretary Buttigieg told us on Monday morning; although we will have our fangirl moments with some of the people we met this week, we will also see these politicians, diplomats, and government workers for who they are—people. Through this, I learned how everyone in government is just someone who is trying to help others in their own way, and whether we agree with them or not, we must recognize and respect those who carry their work out with that intention. For me, this realization humanized these branches of government, these offices, and these positions, as I could now truly imagine myself being a part of the vanguard of change. As the son of a Ugandan immigrant, this meant the world to me. Although I am only one generation away from immense poverty in a place thousands of miles away, I somehow found myself in the White House meeting the President. This spurred a newfound hope in the endless possibilities that exist in this country.

And despite all of this, this wasn't even the best part. I applied to the Senate Youth Program hoping to learn from current leaders of our world, but I ultimately found myself learning most from her future leaders. The students I met from across the country showed me what it meant to have the audacity to believe you can change the world and the constant energy it takes to work at it every day. We came in as strangers but left here as best friends, and it is truly amazing how close people can become in only a week. I met students of color who became leaders in their communities despite attending PWIs, members of Boards of Education, and spokespersons for entire companies. To me, the most beautiful thing was that we were all still kids who loved making TikToks and dancing our hearts out to Miley Cyrus. My most sacred bonds were formed with those in my Military Mentor group, as our philosophy of "Barging In" to the day every morning gave us the confidence to ask questions, be curious, and appreciate each other for what we bring to the table. My military mentor, Lt. Barge, helped us be vulnerable with each other from the first day by sharing what was most important to him, and I will always aim to emulate his leading-by-example mentality in my future endeavors. All of these factors helped reaffirm for me that public service is not about the flashy news headlines or the larger-than-life politicians that do not seem real, but rather it is about the people you care about, admire, and want to work hard for to make the world a better place. At the foundation of public service is love, and that is exactly what I was showered in during the Senate Youth Program. Because of this, I am confident that love will serve as the foundation for the work my peers and I will commit ourselves to in the future.