

## Sydney McGrath, MN – 2024

I used to hate politics. From a young age, I found governmental processes mundane and our political parties too polarizing. Negative opinions about our nation's leaders surrounded me, and I was warned that life in the public sector would leave me bored and burnt out. Even as a child, I was frustrated with the endless partisanship, corruption, and lack of tangible change. In middle school, I wrote politics off and set my sights on medicine. Therefore, as you may have assumed, I applied to the United States Senate Youth Program for all the wrong reasons. I thought it would be cool to meet some politicians and the program would help fund my future goals. However, I didn't expect USSYP to completely change the trajectory of my life.

In just a week, I have grown so much as a person and leader. I've learned more from our mentors, my peers, and our distinguished guests than a college textbook could ever teach me. As I've taken a month to reflect, I have come up with three takeaways that I hope I look back on in the future when the nights are long, the work is hard, and I forget my purpose and mission as a leader of the United States.

First and foremost, most politicians are selfless public servants who entered politics to make a difference, not further oppressive agendas or make lots of money. This week has taught me that what we see on the news is often a biased perspective of our government and often highlights the events or individuals on Capitol Hill that will receive the most views. After all, the media is a business. However, if you were to ask every single public servant who came to speak to us this week why they entered politics and what they hope to accomplish, I can assure you that their answer would have something to do with making the world just a little bit better for everyone. A great example of a selfless leader is Brian Kamoie who came to speak to us during breakfast at the Mayflower Hotel. To tell you the truth, I was quick to make assumptions regarding the kind of person Brian Kamoie was. For example, when I heard that he was the former senior director for Preparedness Policy under President Obama and now a consultant for Deloitte, a private consultant firm, I expected an individual who was more concerned about protecting government assets and resources than U.S. families. However, it's clear from our conversation that he views the U.S. people as the government's most valued asset. Very unlike the stuffy, private consultant I was expecting, Mr. Kamoie began his speech with two truths and a lie after reading some of our @USSYP.24 Instagram posts. He reminds us that while a life of public service can be draining, we are so needed, to be confident in ourselves, and to find the people who want to help. It may be surprising, but they're all around us.

All work matters and our government is working tirelessly to get it done. It's easy to get discouraged about the time it takes for a bill to make its way to Congress. Often, we fixate on the big issues and big changes to our country like the abortion ban or funding wars. When these things don't get decided on for months or even years, it's easy to believe that our system is broken or politicians aren't working hard enough to get things done. However, as Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden reminded us during our lunch, the U.S. government is full of so many moving parts, much of which we don't even see. The politicians, aides, interns, supporting staff, and leaders in government are working tirelessly to make a difference in our country. Just because we can't see it, or it doesn't impact us directly, doesn't mean that change isn't happening. As future politicians, she reminds us that even though our actions may not be known by everyone, our work still matters. Something as simple as sending an email, sharing an idea at a meeting, or having lunch with a group of future politicians can impact our world in ways we don't even know. Whether you are the president of the United States or an intern on Capitol Hill, everyone is doing their part to improve our country and make it just a little bit better.

Finally, politicians are humans too. Like celebrities, when we only see someone on a screen or in a formal setting, it's easy to disassociate them from our peers. Before this trip, holding a position in high government seemed unattainable. Sure, someone had to fill them, but it couldn't be me. I am not worthy. I am not smart enough. There are so many people who are more prepared than I am. However, after having conversations with these people, I came to realize that they are just like you and me. Many of them go home at night and eat dinner with their families. They buy groceries from Target and dream of sunny vacations. They know what it's like to be rejected from colleges, to fall in love, to grieve a lost family member. Most importantly, they were once in our exact shoes. During our conversation with President Biden, he explained that his entire life, everyone viewed him as too young for his position because he was 30 when he became senator. Just like us, he had to convince himself that he was worthy of holding such decision-making power. When he sang off-key to us and introduced us to his granddaughter, for whom he had so much pride, his presidential facade faded and we got to see a side of him many citizens do not. Realizing that politicians are just like you and I is important not only as a citizen but as an office-holding individual. Politicians are not superheroes, and they are not untouchable. Politicians experience burnout. Politicians cannot do it all. As a future leader hopefully in the position of one of our speakers this week, I hope this reflection serves as a reminder and a reminder to the readers to give themselves some grace. Remember your passion, remember that even a small action has a large impact, and remember that you are human. It's okay to make mistakes, and it's okay to ask for help.

The United States Senate Youth Program was a life-changing experience. Never in my life have I been so humbled by the accomplishments of my peers, yet so inspired to make an impact on our country. I laughed, I danced, and I cried. If you received a hug from me, count yourself lucky, those are hard to come by. But in all seriousness, I went into this program excited to meet some politicians, but not to enter politics. I now know that becoming a public servant is the way I can make the biggest impact. Thank you to all the USSYP staff who made this week so impactful. I can't wait to see what the future holds for us. Washington Week was just the start of our political career. Hold tight to the connections we've made and I'll see you on Capitol Hill.