

Lauren Beck, ND – 2024

Washington Week was truly unforgettable. Not only was I able to learn from today's top stateswomen and statesmen, but I also got to learn from the nation's future leaders. I got to experience a week of a lifetime alongside 103 amazing, young, driven people. In the first evening we had an interactive discussion with Bill Doherty from Braver Angels, a nonprofit dedicated to political depolarization. This set the tone for the rest of the week as people from various points of view communicated. Together we were able to learn from one another and disagree with respect and understanding—something our country struggles to do.

Amongst our own discussions we heard from leaders from all facets of public service. My favorite speaker was Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg. To paraphrase Secretary Buttigieg, the further we get away from home the greater we feel a tug to return. Secretary Buttigieg left home for college but felt a desire to serve his hometown South Bend, Indiana. He later served as the city's mayor. He noted the importance of acknowledging why we want to serve our city whether it is the people or the places it holds. His words resonated with me because I plan on attending college out-of-state and leaving my hometown.

Both Secretary Buttigieg and Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan taught me an important lesson: the road to service is a winding one. We assume that people in prestigious positions were meant to have those roles and executed a perfect plan to get there. However, each stop on the winding road is equally important because there is no wrong or single way to serve. Additionally, impactful leaders reassured us that there is a balance between work life and personal life. Mayor Steve Benjamin compared the balance of work and life to a glass ball and a rubber ball. He explained the glass ball as an object that cannot be dropped and must always be polished to keep it clean—that is someone's mental, physical, and overall well-being. The rubber ball represents work because it can be dropped and still bounce back. Similarly, Secretary Buttigieg humanized a life in service by mentioning that he had to put a tie on in the morning before he came to speak with us because he is human too.

In addition to profound leaders, I had the experience of taking in the rich history of our nation. Highlights include our visit to George Washington's Mount Vernon, the National Archives, and Arlington Cemetery. Being in the presence of history is a powerful thing; the crisp, morning air at Arlington brings an incomparable sense of gratitude and grief. I also had the once in a lifetime experience of visiting the White House. There we gathered to watch President Joe Biden's State of the Union address, and I will always remember the energy of the room as we clapped along with the in-person audience. We also had the great honor of meeting Dr. Jill Biden and President Joe Biden himself.

My time with the United States Senate Youth Program resonates with me as many things. The people I met, the lessons I learned about service, and the unforgettable moments will remain with me forever; I am incredibly grateful for Washington Week and this program.