

## Isabella (Bella) Meyer, NE – 2024

“We are just destined for some things in our lives.” Secretary of the Senate, Sonceria Ann Berry, told us this quote during the 62<sup>nd</sup> annual United States Senate Youth Program week. As it is fondly known, “Washington Week ” was a once-in-a-lifetime insight into the inner workings of the U.S. government. Each day was a lesson in a world that seemed so foreign, yet so personal. In the historic backdrop of Washington, D.C., including the iconic Mayflower Hotel, this program spared no expense to curate a legendary experience. The United States Senate Youth Program has fostered generations of leaders within the United States. I can confidently say that this week has once again met this accomplishment. Hosting delegates from all 50 states, D.C., and the Department of Defense overseas high schools, this program brought together the brightest minds from across the nation. Only during Washington Week could you meet 104 of the smartest politically minded individuals over a cup of coffee at breakfast. The United States Senate Youth Program is an unparalleled experience that is almost impossible to quantify in a few words.

Going into Washington Week, I had many expectations of what the city, people, and speakers would be like. I am grateful and surprised to say that each of these expectations were shattered and rebuilt in the best of ways. While there was much to absorb, several quotes stuck with me. My thoughts on them range from awe, and surprise, to humility. Starting off with one of these transformative quotes was Secretary Pete Buttigieg, who explained his journey into politics. I thought this was extremely fascinating, but what I learned the most from him was not a fact I could have ever found through research or his Wikipedia page. During Q&A time, Secretary Pete Buttigieg was asked “what motivates him in his personal life to keep going despite controversy and public hate.” His response truly hit me. Secretary Buttigieg, like many of our other speakers, spoke with candor and passionate honesty. He said “I’ve been a mayor, presidential candidate, a soldier, and a public official ... But I had never been in love.” He went on to explain that his professional career is simply another branch of himself - that his work does not define him, and neither does his identity. I will always remember this conversation, because it opened my eyes to see the humanity behind politics which can seem so isolating.

This week was filled with an abundance of learning experiences. I learned that the White House gives guests custom red, white, and blue M&Ms with the presidential seal. I learned that my best friends could come from places all over the world, and we can bond over the silliest of goals and dreams. I learned that change starts with normal people. While touring the historic rooms of the State Department, my tour guide told me “If the United States is the new Republic, then D.C. is the new Rome.” While she meant this as an explanation of the architecture, it is a wonderful metaphor for our nation. We are a country that is built on others, and we put on a great performance that we are perfect. But no one, no country is perfect. I learned that is why we strive for a more perfect union. Our nation is composed of regular people. People are not perfect. Politicians are just people. But the meaning we assign to all these ideas is what makes our country. At times we are battered and bruised, but we are never truly broken. Naval Academy Chair, former National Security Council Member, and 1989 USSYP Alumni, Mr. Kamoi told us, that “those who think they are crazy enough to change the world - actually do.” I learned that being a little imperfect, crazy and daring is exactly what our America needs.

This experience truly altered my thoughts on public service and showed me that political offices are always subject to the whims of change, yet what remains constant is the love you have for people. Every speaker I interacted with, from both sides of the aisle, had an inherent love for those they were serving. In today’s social climate it can be easy to separate the individual from the politician. The United States Senate Program broke down these walls and unveiled real people who are trying their hardest to do the right thing. As Secretary Ann Berry said, we all have a destiny. USSYP was a transformative week that opened my eyes to the possibilities my path can take, and for that, I am eternally grateful.