

Grace Yoon, NJ – 2024

“The further away I got from home, the more it mattered that I was from somewhere.” - Pete Buttigieg

In both a figurative and literal manner, Secretary Pete Buttigieg explained to delegates of the 62nd class of the US Senate Youth Program that roads and transportation lead us home. It seemed almost fitting for him to make this comparison, given his position in government and public service, but I later came to realize how perfectly this defined our week-long experience. It matters where we come from, the stories we bear, and the contributions we make towards defining the stories of those around us. The 104 delegates authored the story of Washington Week. It will be remembered as a story with each line written by a new friend I made or a new speaker I heard from. New perspectives, opinions, questions, and the occasional art piece scatter themselves across the tattered pages of my navy US Senate Youth Program notebook.

The first page of my notebook reflects on a lesson in civil discourse and political polarization. In a perfect entrance to Washington Week, Braver Angels taught us the value of storytelling and listening. Sitting at a round table, we exchanged ideas and opinions for the first time as a group. Conversations ending in messages of “let’s talk more later” and “your story is fascinating” floated throughout the air as curiosity grew. Further, Washington Week invited members of all political standings to come together in hopes of giving future public servants a taste of the diversity of opportunities available in DC and across the country. The later pages of my notebook are filled with short memos from each day. From asking Justice Elena Kagan about constitutional interpretation to taking selfies with Senator Cory Booker to learning about the impact of civic education at the National Archives to hearing from numerous diplomats and leaders at the Department of State, I am reminded in reflection that the road to change is not easy but that we have each other and a community that will continuously help us grow. The occasional sticky note stuck onto a page is filled with advice from my Military Mentor. An entire page contains frantically scribbled paragraphs, a memory of a late-night reflection following a State of the Union watch party at the White House that ended in meeting President Biden. All of these pages remind me that in acknowledging that we have issues within our government, we take the first step towards amending the system.

In the course of a week, I came to understand why “you can’t fight someone the same way when you know their heart.” Despite the unforgiving, cynical nature of political polarization and discord within our own communities, all of our stories intertwine and cross paths in profound ways, enriching our collective discourse. It would be wrong to say that this class would be what it is without the opinions, beliefs, and backgrounds the delegates brought to the table. In the same respect, it would be wrong to say that our government is unchanging for we continue to feed it with our stories, making it an inherently living institution. Therefore, one theme remained clear throughout all the speakers and presentations during Washington Week: the majority of us are striving to reach across the aisle. Fighting against the feelings of burnout and discouragement we feel about our political institutions, this week of learning and listening showed me that even our political opposition may share the same intentions when proposing policies. All in all, discussion truly does dilute divisions.

Here’s to having difficult conversations, laughing a little harder, shedding a few more happy tears, and learning a little more each day because we must all acknowledge the prejudices we hold deep down inside, learn to lay them down, and take the time to find the humanity within each of us.