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The United States Senate Youth Program was a life-changing experience that I am still attempting to digest as I write this essay, over a month after I departed my hometown of Albuquerque for the nation's capital. There are so many moments that will forever stay with me from Washington Week— from visionary speakers to casual conversations. Yet there were a handful of speakers and events that stood out with a particular emphasis.

The hour before Secretary Pete Buttigieg entered the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower hotel were among the longest in my life. I could hardly go a minute without glancing at the doors to see if he had made an entrance, and struggled to eat the food I had clumsily placed in front of me. As I nervously bantered with the delegates sitting next to me, I remembered watching Buttigieg's debate performances during the 2020 election, describing his experience as a young person in a way that related to so many of us – and the feeling of sheer joy I felt in late 2020 when his nomination was announced. At last, Secretary Buttigieg strode into a boisterous applause and launched into his remarks. What struck me the most was how closely he seemed to have followed the same track that so many of us are on— including his stint at the Senate Youth Program just over twenty years ago. The enthusiasm he brought to even the most seemingly mundane issues was incredibly apparent— like when he would excitedly point out new highway and bridge projects in the home state of almost every delegate who asked a question. But in the end, it was the special interaction I was lucky enough to have with the Secretary that stood out to me, as he exclaimed “New Mexico” upon seeing my flag-pin lapel, and approached me excitedly.

Next, another speaker that stood out to me was Representative Emanuel Cleaver of Missouri. For a member of Congress who had represented his Kansas City-area seat for almost two decades— including time as Chair of the Congressional Black Caucus— Representative Cleaver immediately came off as humorous and candid. His remarks described the difficulties of passing legislation in Congress but also illuminated his passion and personal ties to affordable housing, an issue I care deeply about. In addition, it was inspiring to hear about his journey from local government to the halls of Congress and to hear the challenges he had to overcome on that journey as a person of color. But, once again, it was his personable nature that stood out— and on his way out, he heartily shook my hand and praised New Mexico's work on affordable housing when I proudly noted my home state, showing again that despite his seniority, he genuinely cared about engaging with the next generation of leaders.

Another especially profound speaker was Dr. Katherine Scott, the United States Senate's historian. I was tasked with delivering appreciation remarks for Dr. Scott, who graduated from the University of New Mexico before starting her accomplished career in congressional history. As she had just entered the role of Senate Historian the previous fall, I didn't know what to expect from her remarks. Yet almost immediately upon meeting her, I felt her genuine enthusiasm and true compassion. During our lunch together, she and I had an extremely memorable conversation about major events in Senate history, as she effortlessly ticked through slews of current and former Senators who've shaped the upper chamber's history. But it was her remarks— where she spent the bulk of her time describing the life and legacy of former New Mexico Senator Dennis Chavez – the first Latino Senator in American history— that I remember the most affectionately. Her remarks about the Senator harkened me back to my home state and made me prouder than ever to carry its banner at the Senate Youth Program.

Next, while Secretary Buttigieg, Representative Cleaver, and Dr. Scott stood out as amazing speakers, two other events will forever be etched into my memory. The first is the Senate reception— an event that still doesn't feel real— and was like a dream come true for me, as a longtime C-Span enthusiast. I can still feel the nervous enthusiasm boiling up in the crowd of anticipatory delegates gathered in the rotunda of the Russell Senate office building, just a few moments before we entered the stately Kennedy Caucus Room. Inside, it was surreal. One moment, I was watching dozens of

delegates stare in wonder at their Senators— and the next, I was in front of one of mine, Senator Ben Ray Lujan. Even more surreal was the fact that I was able to have almost a twenty-minute-long discussion with Senator Lujan about several pieces of legislation, from voting rights to the environment, where he threw out countless candid refrains about the legislative process. And then there were the cameos— Senators Cory Booker, Bernie Sanders, Mitt Romney, Elizabeth Warren, and so many other prominent voices whose legacies would forever be etched into American history— were standing just feet away from us.

And lastly, I cannot do the Senate Youth Program justice without mentioning the truly wondrous night we were able to have at the White House on the night of President Joe Biden's State of the Union address. For years, I would always hold my own mini watch parties at home, marveling as members of Congress filed into the House chamber as if they were celebrities at the Oscars. All of that made our watch party in the East Room of the White House even more special, as we munched on popcorn and repeatedly broke out into thunderous applause. It was a magical night— and one that we soon realized was only getting started shortly after the address concluded. After a wonderful meeting with First Lady Dr. Jill Biden, I was stunned to hear that we would be able to see the President of the United States in just a matter of minutes. As we waited in the warmly-lit room, I couldn't help but think about how much President Biden had helped keep me hopeful at the height of the pandemic, at the start of the war with Ukraine, and at so many other incidents that tested our nation's resolve.

And then, there he was— President Joe Biden, praising us as the next generation of leaders, in a moment that— as Irish Poet Seamus Heaney once said— made "hope and history rhyme."

Overall, the Senate Youth Program was an unforgettable experience that gave me a close-up view of American democracy. However, what will always stay with me is the sheer decency and humility embodied by all of our speakers and guests, a much-needed reminder that, in the end, we are all working towards the common goal of a brighter future— we simply need to work together to achieve it.