

Ella Calvert, OK – 2024

When I received the email that I'd been selected for the 2024 Senate Youth Program, I had just gotten home. I was in such a hurry to read it that I hadn't even turned on the lights! Excited and thankful, I jumped up and down in my dark house for what seemed like hours. I was thrilled at the idea of the program: flying to D.C., meeting government officials, and hanging out with new friends from all over the country---it sounded amazing. But I had no idea just how transformative and influential this week would end up being.

My anticipation built when I realized my fellow delegates and I could connect before the program, courtesy of the Internet and the power of Instagram group chats. Before ever meeting in-person, there were many nights spent messaging, getting acquainted, and discussing current events and policies, which created an instant sense of community from the moment I arrived at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C.

Learning from Bill Doherty of Braver Angels later that night in the ballroom had a large influence on the way I approached conversations throughout the week. He spoke about the importance of bipartisanship and reducing political polarization, and how to achieve that through transparent conversation and asking questions to understand, not convert. His lesson helped me accept that just as I wanted to learn more about other participants and their views, I also needed to be open and honest with my own beliefs, trusting that I wouldn't be ostracized. We have more in common than they are led to believe, and after working through divisive party talking points, I found out most people fall closer to the middle of the political spectrum than the extremes. He encouraged me to be brave through honesty and vulnerability.

My first conversation to intentionally practice this vulnerability took place while walking through the National Portrait Gallery with Jamie Howard (MD) and Chris Alfano (VT). Being from Oklahoma, the political environments we came from couldn't have been more different. As we walked by President Trump's portrait, we had an insightful discussion about how he was able to be elected, his strategy, and why people I knew voted for him. This led into a topic I dread—and avoid—abortion. A notoriously difficult topic to find common ground, most conversations I've witnessed in the past devolve into a stand-off before enough care is taken to get into the nuances where any agreement may be found. But this time was different! The respect for each other came first, and we were able to consider other approaches and secondary issues. That is just one impactful memory from the week. The week was filled with moments that are serving as the blueprint for how I build my life and interact with others.

I hope I am properly conveying how honored I felt to be invited to participate, and to receive the opportunities to listen to the leaders of our country and visit our Nation's Capital. In the fall, I filled out the application, not daring to expect anything to come of it. If you had told me in August that in March, I'd get to meet President Biden... after watching a livestream of his State of the Union speech... in the White House (!), not only would I not believe it, but I would have questioned your grasp of reality. It truly was a dream come true, and I will forever treasure the conversations, my journal, badge, agenda, and every other remnant, along with the lessons I learned and memories I made. I'm grateful to the Oklahoma Department of Education, the Hearst Foundations, the United States Military, every other individual who took time out of their year to come speak to us or serve us in any capacity, and God, for giving me this opportunity.