

Alex Chen, PA – 2024

From Philadelphia's William H. Gray 30th Street Station to my home there are seventeen stops. Before sunrise on March 9th, my birthday, I passed through each of those stops on the train line home, reveling in the soul of the week that had just passed.

Today, a month later, I remember all seventeen stops clearly. I remember because each thought that danced through my spirit that day was put to paper — to memories sealed between embossed blue covers. Indeed, I unveiled reflection and unfurled my emotions in that journal. Those thoughts, raw like the dream, punctured through my exhaustion; and in my tiredness that morning, I found a living vibrance. I felt alive.

Today, I want to share word-for-word excerpts from the notes I wrote in my USSYP journal while passing through those seventeen stops. In doing so, I reflect on my personhood, my nation, and the beauty I found in the hearts of so many others during Washington Week.

William H. Gray 30th Street Station. "Today is my birthday and the day I return from Washington Week. On a day ostensibly about me, I can't help but take time to amplify my gratitude for others. I can't help but appreciate the memories and lessons we now share together. It is now dawn, and I feel a newfound sense of warmth."

Overbrook Station. "I cannot forget in those very first moments on the walk to our shuttle to the Mayflower hotel how Kyle (NY) and I laughed. How we both forgot what it meant to be a stranger. I cannot forget his smile. Thank you, Kyle, for teaching me that service beams from joy."

Merion Station. "How I regret not thanking our tour guide at Mount Vernon one last time. On our walk down to Washington's tomb, she and I shared our love for history together. As she patiently put up with my endless questions, I remember seeing her eyes grow kinder. Thank you for teaching me that service sprouts from the benevolence of eternal teachers."

Narberth Station. "I remember as the six of us in our military mentor group huddled in our cove on the third floor. As we listened intently to our mentor, he spoke candidly and asked the vulnerable questions. *What inspires us to serve?* Day by day we transformed our inlet into a haven of brotherhood as we wrestled with finding a truer answer to that question that we arrived with. Thank you, Lieutenant Barge, for teaching me that service requires the unity of honest introspection."

Wynnewood Station. "On the morning of the 6th, I had the honor of introducing my fellow Pennsylvanian and USSYP alumnus Brian Kamoie. As he recounted his experiences, he left us with poetry: *what is it that you plan to do with your one wild, precious life?* Thank you, Mr. Kamoie, for teaching me that service is a vocation of possibility."

Ardmore Station. "Perhaps my biggest regret during the week was not hugging Viseth, one of the Mayflower hotel dining room staff. As we discussed the shared experience of our family's immigration to America, I couldn't help but be touched. And as I wiped my tears, sewn across Emma Lazarus' *'lamp beside the golden door'*, I came away with this: thank you, Viseth, for teaching me that service enshrines our nation with the dreams of each of our family's pasts."

Haverford Station. "My camera roll is now and forever priceless. Strewn among pictures of desserts and delegate group photos are the works of our USSYP photographers and their tireless efforts. To them I am forever indebted. To capture a memory is the greatest gift. Thank you, Jakub and Erin, for teaching me that service preserves our happiest moments."

Bryn Mawr Station. “Steeped in the solemnity that echoed off the marble in Arlington, I watched a veteran wipe his tears, moved by what that hallowed Tomb meant. Thank you, sir, for teaching me that service is a lifelong sacrifice to others found deep in the courage of our heart.”

Rosemont Station. “Each bus ride during Washington Week, I immersed myself in Ezekiel’s (DC) captivating and truly unique perspective. At every turn he broke my perception of what genuine leadership looks like. Thank you, Zeke, for teaching me that service transcends preconception.”

Villanova Station. “Late at night my roommate and I traversed endless bouts of laughter, introspection, and honesty. At every step he showed me how kindness manifests itself in every word and action. Thank you, Mert (DE), for teaching me that service cannot exist without compassion.”

Radnor Station. “Each day I felt unceasing energy and infinitudes of personality, always wondering where I felt it from. Without fail, I found it in one person. Thank you, Wright (OH), for teaching me that service is enhanced by our individuality.”

St. David’s Station. “There was a constant with me throughout the Week that kept me grounded with a sense of home. She infused our community with my perspective and inspired me in so many indescribable ways. Thank you, Edan (PA), for teaching me that service comes from inspiration and inspiration comes from a sense of identity.”

Wayne Station. “On the last night of Washington Week I expressed my gratitude to the security staff that ensured our safety and peace of mind. I wish I had expressed the fullness of what I felt. I wish I had said: thank you, all, for teaching me that service bears responsibility with both humility and pride.”

Strafford Station. “Approaching midnight in the East Room of the White House, we waited for President Biden to return from the State of the Union. He and countless White House leaders generously gave us their time, hospitality, and wisdom. To them I say, thank you for teaching me that true service fosters the hope of the next generation.”

Devon Station. “In the immensity and constant motion of the week, I found myself treasuring the silent instances — times where I could bond with others through gathering my thoughts. Amidst the silence, Annie (NC) was with me. Thank you, Annie, for teaching me that service can be found in the quietest moments where only the inner uniqueness of people can be heard.”

Berwyn Station. “I can’t shake this perpetual feeling of direction — one baked in the wisdom that others have shared with me. I have found endless guiding principles to direct me. Thank you, speakers, for teaching me that service knows that the people *‘crazy enough to think they can change the world ... will.’*”

Daylesford Station: “As I get closer to home, I can’t help but remember what Secretary Buttigieg told us. *The further you get from home, the more you realize it means something to be from somewhere.* The layers of communities I belong to are everything to me. They are my bedrock of solace. To those who made me who I am today, I thank you. Thank you for teaching me that service comes from somewhere: home.”

Paoli Station: “I would give so much to return to Washington Week — if anything, just to thank each and every person who made it possible. I know now that this journal will continue to pour my soul out in words, thanking each delegate, Military Mentor, speaker, staff, and stranger in the coming days. To them and to anyone reading, I thank you for teaching me that service is found in us all. It defines us. This stop is my last, and I will soon make it home. And, for now, this place I love, and a bed to sleep in, are more than enough for me.”