

Dominic Muratore, RI – 2024

Rhode Island, more like a small town, is the community to which I am most connected.

Often referred to as a “hidden gem” by New Yorkers summering in Newport, I am a proud Rhode Islander. A diverse community, Rhode Island continues to inspire me each day with its coffee milk enthusiasts, the dialect switching words like bubbler for water fountain, and sterling beach homes to most in the summer. Going to Washington, D.C., I was most excited to meet people living outside of my 48-by-37-mile bubble. Meeting someone from Alaska, learning about what happens in the Dakotas, and seeing the southern charm in action were experiences unlike any other. Furthermore, meeting the most powerful leaders and insightful speakers was a transformative opportunity that reaffirmed all my aspirations to lead. This was especially true when hearing from Secretary Pete Buttigieg, U.S. Senate Historian Katherine Scott, Deputy Chief Daria Neal, and President Joe Biden.

After phone banking for Secretary Buttigieg in eighth grade, it was an unequivocal moment in my life to meet my hero in person. More so, how sincere he was - Secretary Buttigieg isn't in politics for "politicking", but rather to better people's lives. Secretary Buttigieg was the same in person as he was on the campaign trail and news programs. His advice on being young in politics, fighting for your country, and protecting basic rights such as marriage equality will stay with me for the rest of my life. Another special moment was meeting both of my senators at the Senate reception. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse and Senator Jack Reed joined my co-delegate and me, imparting invaluable advice to us: to always fight for a seat at the table, do what's right, and most importantly, remember where you came from. Through working in politics and with leaders, they always told me to remember my “why”. It was special to me that my senators shared this belief as they fought for their “why” each day.

I have never had more hope than when President Biden walked into the East Room. Simply being in the White House was monumental for me. I had only ever seen it from the outside and dreamed of one day going in. Walking on the path leading to the entrance, the Washington Monument was to my left, and the residence was in front of me. Portraits of powerful women: First Lady Michelle Obama and Secretary Hillary Clinton draped the walls. We settled around the TVs to watch the State of the Union, White House candy merchandise in hand. The excitement of hearing the president deliver a powerful speech in which he received hundreds of applause from my co-delegates and myself uplifted our tired selves. As we ascended to the risers, I had an irreversible smile and a sense of pride for our country. As the president spoke about his initial Senate run and being the youngest member in the chamber, now the oldest president, his message of devotion to one's community is a belief I share and act on daily. While being told throughout the week that “we were the future of the country” had become cliché, hearing it from the president deeply resonated. Meeting President Biden was an experience that will stay with me for the rest of my life, and his sincere empathy is a guiding light on how to work in a divisive career for my peers and me.

Taking every history class at my school, there is no history lesson or class I shy away from. As a history lover, hearing from the U.S. Senate Historian Katherine Scott was a privilege that fed my inquisitive mind. Her ability to tell the story of the failure of women's suffrage and its inevitable passage was inspiring. While she spoke about the fight for women's suffrage, the course of action is interchangeable with any social goal. The United States Senate Program unites 104 delegates with diverse ideologies and policy perspectives. My personal belief lies in advancing education and fostering equity. I recognize that achieving a more equitable educational system or implementing school improvements is a long-term fight, similar to the prolonged fight for women's suffrage. Yet, with insights and encouragement from Dr. Scott, my fellow delegates and I are reminded that meaningful change is possible and imperative for whatever we believe in.

Driving through South Providence to get to school each morning, I am reminded of the public health crisis in my state. The neighborhood, which is composed of mostly low-income people of color, has the highest rate of asthma prevalence in the state. This is due to systemic racism in city planning, which allowed major pollutants to be situated in this neighborhood. The people of South Providence breathe in this carcinogenic exhaust, resulting in a higher prevalence of respiratory issues. Allowing one's health to be compromised is unconscionable. However, the work of people like Deputy Chief

Daria Neal ensures these people are not left voiceless. Fighting for residents in Alabama without a proper waste management system and ensuring people live up to public health and environmental standards in the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice, Ms. Neal inspired me, especially as someone interested in the social drivers of health. While Ms. Neal can't act without a direct complaint of wrongdoing, she serves as a reminder of what I can do in politics to better the lives of others.

I am forever grateful for the United States Senate Youth Program. Whether we were laughing together at meals, dancing to Drake songs, or staying up crying with each other on the last night, I met delegates who quickly became best friends. A special relationship formed between each of us, and I am excited to grow with each other. Our frequent Facetime calls and presence in each other's lives point to our unbreakable bond. While Rhode Island will continue to be the community to which I am most connected, I am excited to see how my new community of lifelong friends will support and inspire me in my future endeavors.