

## Ryan Lukowicz, RI – 2024

The United States Senate Youth Program was truly an amazing experience which I am running out of positive adjectives to describe. It was an honor to be the first blind delegate selected in the 62-year history of the program and the staff was nothing but accommodating of my needs. This included having an escort guide me from location to location, as the fast pace was challenging to navigate with my cane. I was able to fly down a day early so the person could be trained on the technique in addition to how to support me in general.

The great news was I got to enjoy every aspect of this trip to the fullest just like everyone else such as asking multiple questions to the speakers, keeping up with the tour groups, introducing a journalist I looked up to and participating in the farewell night like the spirit award competition. I was able to welcome the group dance which our coach won a trophy for! My biggest highlight of the week was getting to watch the State of the Union address in the White House. I will never forget eating the patriotic M&Ms and popcorn at tables with extremely fancy coverings alongside President Biden's advisors and press secretary.

Words can't describe how we heard Biden speak for over 20 minutes after midnight shortly after giving the biggest speech of the year to the country. We were on risers situated for a picture with him standing in specific rows and columns. I will never forget listening to him walk around to everyone while simultaneously giving remarks about getting to co-sponsor the legislation to start this program to learning about his career as a young member of the Delaware Democratic Party.

This occurred about 17 hours after getting to meet Judy Woodruff since the PBS correspondent spoke to the 104 students at breakfast. I enjoyed getting to practice walking up to the podium and giving my introduction prior to the meal followed by walking out to greet Mrs. Woodruff. This was a perfect match for me since I host a podcast called Behind the Candidates where I have interviewed many candidates running for political office in Rhode Island and have analyzed the results of elections with other politicians.

I was also never exposed to such formal dinners where I learned what the three forks in the formal place setting were for and knowing that the main course was going to be a fantastic protein, starch and mix vegetables. My favorite dessert was the infamous White Chocolate Capitols, which were shaped after the domes. They were filled with berries and a cream, beautifully complimenting the chocolate.

Other experiences from that evening included being up close and personal with the original Constitution and listening to Republican Senator John Barrasso. He was one of our dozens of speakers who joined us on either side of a tour or after a meal. One of my favorites was the Civil Rights panel at the Department of Justice building, who proved to me that there are different kinds of lawyers in areas that I care about like protecting those with disabilities.

I also appreciated that the Transportation Secretary had so much knowledge by connecting peoples' home states to the infrastructure projects going on nearby them as well as his important off script remarks about representing the LGBTQ+ community in his role.

The group was also able to visit Mount Vernon the first full day. They made sure I could feel a replica of the key that George Washington was given and allowed me to examine samples of what pieces of furniture felt like throughout the home; our group was given exclusive access to the original entrance from the late 1700s which the general public can't get into.

Throughout the program, I was surrounded by what I believe are the 103 best students of our country who will all be future respected leaders. I loved learning about each state and person through conversations. This included how Wisconsin is working to redraw Congressional lines after widespread gerrymandering and Hawaii is forming committees to evaluate the importance of classes like Civics Education and Personal Finance.

Lighter topics were brought up as well as I tried to explain the concept of coffee milk which is a Rhode Island staple and the different opinions about the temperatures were vast based on what state one came from. The bigger takeaway for me from these discussions was how we all bonded over serving in an elected or appointed role in student government, but differed in our backgrounds and political beliefs. Even students going to school through DODEA were represented including one from Germany and another from Japan.

One last story I will share is the fact that we were at the Supreme Court on the day where they made a unanimous decision to keep Trump on the ballot for the upcoming 2024 Presidential election. The media presence was intense and there were a few protesters too. After the entrance and a brief tour, we got to ask Justice Elena Kagan questions about her experiences on the Supreme Court. She told a memorable story about her and Justice Scalia being able to hunt together following many cases where they disagreed about guns.

The best parts of the program were the amazing people, speakers and tours! This essay just scratches the surface of what I experienced and one has to apply for the program themselves to truly understand the great extent in which this trip will change your life.