

Petyon White, SC – 2024

Stepping onto the podium, the light cast a glow on my face. I commenced my farewell speech to the 62nd Annual United States Senate Youth Program with a profound statement, "America is not an idea; America is a belief." Reflecting on my journey, I couldn't help but recall the stark contrast between my upbringing in Greenville, South Carolina, where desolate green fields surrounded me, and the previous week, where I found myself at the epicenter of the nation's capital amidst the grandeur of the United States Senate Youth Program.

I come from a small town in the upstate of South Carolina, a relatively small state sandwiched between two more prominent and well-known states - Georgia and North Carolina. Highways and extensive plains dominate the area I come from. But just like millions of students across the nation, I always thought about our country's direction, and those questions linger. Will there be a climate that my children will enjoy as much as I have? Will we make meaningful legislative progress that will alter the course of American History? Do our lawmakers genuinely care for their constituents, and if so, what are they doing to reflect this notion?

During the flight to Washington, D.C., I found myself pondering these questions in the confined space of the aircraft, thousands of feet above the ground. I was filled with anticipation, but little did I know that the week ahead would not only meet my expectations but surpass them, leaving an indelible mark on my personal growth and understanding.

As we arrived, we received keepsakes, including a journal to document the preceding week, snacks to enjoy during bus rides, and our lanyard to permit us access to the government buildings. Throughout this week, I met Justices like Elena Kagen, Senators like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, Cabinet members like Pete Buttigieg and Antony Blinken, and even, in a surprise visit, President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden.

Something I had never expected to be so central to the programs was the people I met. Growing up in South Carolina, the political conversations were biased and often one-sided; however, as I landed in Washington, the conversations became more diverse almost immediately. On the program's second day, I traveled the room, meeting delegates who yielded from every corner of the Nation - some representing the Department of Defense who had much more extensive journeys from Asia and Europe. One moment, in particular, stands out when I approached a relatively moderate delegate and provided our growing group with his analysis of the upcoming presidential election. I thought, *how insightful*.

This moment set the tone for the week to come; we would have profound, even philosophical discussions. We would stay up late talking about our own lives around the country. Most importantly, as I listened to each individual's stories, I engaged with people about their lives, stresses, and problems. I learned something I will never forget; just like me, each of these *delegates knew precisely where they came from*. They brought their perspectives, their values, and their analysis of each speaker at each event. The American Poet from Massachusetts, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., said, "Friendship is the breathing rose, with sweets in every fold." Yes, throughout the United States Senate Youth Program, you will meet incredible Politicians who serve at every level of government. However, the most important part of the program that supersedes departure is the forged friendships. In years to come, I will bump into these delegates under the vaulted ceilings of Capitol Hill or in one of the fifty represented statehouses.

In my final reflections, all I can think about is how much the trajectory of my life has changed. From the sloping hills of Greenville to the skyscrapers of D.C., if I had to leave one message to the future youth, *you have the power to enact real change or be anything you put your mind to*.