

Ira Sharma, TN – 2024

To say the Senate Youth Program has changed my life is an understatement- it has revolutionized the way I see the world, made me understand the power in my leadership, and has left me with a great sense of responsibility towards my nation. While this responsibility to serve could be described as a burden, I've come away from the week seeing it as a privilege. This is perfectly exemplified from a quote from Secretary of State Blinken, who in his address to us at the State Department said- "Having that flag behind you, literally and figuratively, there is nothing like it."

As you may be able to tell, all of us delegates started the week aware of the immense opportunity we had been provided- outfits had been purchased, discussed on the groupchat, and carefully packed for the week. The previous year's schedule was obsessed over and flight schedules were exchanged. Teachers, mentors, schools, school districts, and local newspapers had been notified - we were off to represent our community in the nation's capital. The moment we set foot in the ballroom of the Mayflower, the anticipation seemed to explode - this was OUR Washington Week. This energy - the energy of 104 delegates full of hope and excitement for the future- was infectious, coloring all the days we spent together.

The funny thing about putting 104 accomplished and passionate youth leaders together is that we simultaneously act like teenagers and seasoned representatives of our communities. The first day of USSYP, I had an incredibly impactful conversation with my fellow delegates about gun control legislation, followed by a delegate-led line dancing tutorial in the ballroom before curfew. Interspersed between question and answer sessions of insightful questions on the meaning of leadership and bipartisanship, we played long games of Uno, did the worm, and took endless selfies at strange angles on our phones. One of my closest delegate friends and I spent coach rides discussing our communications roles in various organizations and political campaigns and laughing at the miniature lint roller he carried in his backpack. In this, we all formed close bonds that will serve us for years to come. We left the week partners in self-growth, political awareness, leadership, and perhaps most importantly, in friendship. We've already extensively discussed our plans to reunite in D.C., at the Mayflower, ready to recreate the special moments from this past week.

Of these special moments, a few stood out to me in particular. I'm from Memphis, Tennessee, a small city on the banks of the Mississippi River with a history deeply influenced by civil rights history - it was in our town that the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. I had the honor delivering appreciation remarks for Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, Kristen Clarke, during our Thursday programming at the Department of Justice. As she spoke about the DOJ working on hate crime cases, holding police departments accountable, and preserving voting rights for all, I found myself smiling - it was like a modern affirmation of Dr. King's message and his quest for justice. Seeing the DOJ continue to uphold the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other landmark civil rights discrimination was one of the highlights of the trip - it has left me inspired to continue to push for progress, secure in the knowledge that there are so many working towards the same goal. AAG Clarke took the time to speak to me and my co-delegate, Trey, and encouraged us to take note of injustice around us and fight against it. As I left the DOJ, it felt like I was floating on a cloud of inspiration and motivation - I'll forever be thankful I had the opportunity to visit and hear from attorneys.

Another special moment that stands out in my memory is the coach ride to Arlington National Cemetery. One of our military mentors, Captain Daniel McGurkin of the Marine Corps, stood up, notebook in hand. In the brief trip to Arlington, Capt. McGurkin told us the story of a young officer in the Vietnam War, who courageously risked his life multiple times for members of his unit, including a

nineteen-year-old soldier who was injured in action. With this story, Capt. McGurkin challenged us to consider the “why” behind public service; he left us with three simple lessons: “Always remember: It’s not all about you. Always consider: did I do everything I could? Always know: you are indebted to the things that were not done to you.” He had each of us write these simple lessons down on the inside cover of our notebooks, and by the time we were done, all of us were wiping our eyes. I had always felt patriotic in some way - I felt a call to serve, but Capt. McGurkin’s lecture forced me to reflect on my “why.” That speech made me understand what patriotism means to me - not just pride in my nation or its accomplishments, but love. Enough love to work hard, make sacrifices, and think about the collective rather than the individual. Throughout the wreath-laying ceremony, our trip to the Pentagon, and the farewell dinner, this simple lesson in service remained at the front of my mind. Undoubtedly, I’ll carry Capt. McGurkin’s words with me wherever I go from now on.

As I write this reflection, a few weeks after the end of USSYP 24, I’m struck with just how much it has changed the course of my life already. I’ve spent much of the last months texting and calling my new best friends, reading over and reflecting on the notes I took, and reminiscing over photos of our week together. I’ve gotten a new job on a local campaign, and I’ve started planning out clubs and activities I’m looking forward to joining in college related to service. Every day, in my government class, I think back to the week, remembering my firsthand experiences with each branch of government we learn about. Many of my fellow delegates have joked that life is now categorized by “before USSYP” and “after USSYP,” jokes aside, that has honestly proved true for me. I now see the world of government and policy not as daunting or inaccessible, but as empowering and in my grasp. I’m ready to embrace all that comes with service and dive headfirst into it all. I see our delegation’s future shine ahead of us, full of the kind of passion and drive America needs now more than ever. Each one of my fellow delegates motivates me to continue showing up and to truly commit myself to service in all I do. So, here’s to the 62nd Annual Class of the United States Senate Youth Program - I’m thrilled to see all we accomplish and achieve soon.