

Eva Gould, VT – 2024

“I don't want to pass something down to you, that I broke.” A valuable sentence for a teenager to hear from an adult. Said by the memorable Senate Parliamentarian, Elizabeth MacDononough who deals a great amount of power over the Senate and its proceedings. To hear someone in power say this is hopeful. As I look around my town and school in a very progressive state I see a loss of motivation, hopelessness, and a feeling of helplessness. The youth are discouraged. The future, at times, looks awfully grave. To hear that the generations before us are looking out for my peers and I, truly makes the future look much brighter.

As I've spent this last month reflecting on the week spent at the United States Senate Youth program, I have trouble remembering myself before this opportunity. Rarely do humans get to experience this type of week in their entire existence. A week that reads as an “in-depth view of the Senate and the federal government overall as well as a deeper understanding of the interrelationship of the legislative, judicial and executive branches.” But what really is, being met by 103 compassionate, intelligent and amazing teenagers who have each experienced life in different ways and carry with them a unique story. 17 of the nation's best military role models who serve our country to the highest ability every single day. 7 days packed full of adults excited to speak to youth, giving their best advice, opening their world and sharing meaningful knowledge. And 1 teary goodbye when you part from an eye-opening experience that can hardly be put into words.

The change you will experience from walking into a crowded ballroom as your heart beats fast in your chest, to the heartache as you depart the Mayflower is something difficult to record. For me this change started within 3 hours of arriving in Washington D.C. Bill Doherty was a flawless choice for the first guest speaker of the week. Mr. Doherty told my fellow delegates and me about his organization *Braver Angels*. He spoke of the unique power my generation holds to lead the nation in reunite bipartisanship and compromise. He was an incredible speaker and extremely interactive. His words about civil discourse and how valuable having conversations with people with varying opinions absolutely set the tone for the week. His mission to connect people of different parties and backgrounds reminds me a lot of the United States Senate Youth Program. I found myself looking back on this speech as I engaged in eye-opening debates with my peers.

By Monday, I felt like I had a family. After 2 nights with my amazing new friends, mentors and having stepped through George Washington's door, I couldn't believe I got to spend the rest of the week here. This morning, I was ecstatic to hear from our breakfast speaker, the fantastic Pete Buttigieg. Mr. Buttigieg managed to relate to each and every person in the room, a feat nearly impossible. I watched peers' faces light up when he could name the road they drove to school on and realized how much he cared for each one of the people he served. As an alumnus, it was particularly amazing to hear from him as it gave me hope that I too can reach my highest goal. Mr. Buttigieg spoke about how going further from home brought him closer to South Bend, Indiana. The things from hometown made him unique and for the first time he got to share what made him unique to others. He spoke about how valuable differences of people and perspectives are. From relating to the most rural students to encouraging a safe community and strength to the queer students, every single person walked away from that breakfast feeling fulfilled.

This was only the beginning. More greatness followed, some of my favorites being Carla Hayden, Librarian of Congress, Brian Kamoie, Cyber and Strategic Risk, Judy Woodruff, PBS, Kristen Clarke, Attorney General for Civil Rights and of course, what was known as our Super Bowl; The Senate Reception. If I could rewrite the entire schedule, I would, as there was never a dull moment and each speaker carried valuable insight, knowledge and perspective. The military aspect was something I will hold close to my heart. My group and mentor, Lt. Kate Krolicki changed my entire week. The bond we formed and things we learned I will never forget. I will always treasure and remember The Tomb of the Unknown, The Pentagon 9/11 Memorial, the mentor introduction movies, and even debating the military role in our diplomacy simulation.

Although I have not witnessed previous USSYP Washington weeks, I can confidently say the Class of 2024 was truly unique. My lovely group and the entire administration created a growing and learning environment filled with endless social opportunities that the Class of 2024 never failed to seize. From fun and silly conversations to deep, personal conversations everyone approached each other with kindness and a smile on their face. To share the first ever USSYP Coach Spirit Awards, which my Coach #2 proudly won was such a gift. The connection forged with this class is something I crave now that I have gone home to Vermont. I have no doubt that we will make every effort and engagement in our new Alumni Network and hopefully one day reunite as a whole. Thank you, United States Senate Youth Program, for all the joy and hope you have provided me for the future. "When you understand people better, it makes you better at what you do" - Elena Kagan, Supreme Court of the United States.