

Aanya Shah, MI – 2024

“We are indebted not to the things people have done for us, but for the things they didn’t do, because of us.”

When Captain McGurkin of the United States Marine Corps shared this quote on our ride to the Arlington National Cemetery, I was hit with an indescribable wave of gratefulness that hasn’t left me since. A feeling of indebtedness to soldiers who had sacrificed their lives for our safety – their tombstones a poignant reminder of their selfless service. Indebted to the distinguished speakers who imparted wisdom that I’ll carry for eternity. Indebted to the plethora of conversations I’ve shared with fellow delegates, from discussing cognitive geopolitics, to discourse on car-centric infrastructure. Perhaps most of all, however, I felt a formidable sense of indebtedness to each and every experience that the 62nd United States Senate Youth Program so graciously provided.

From sharing an early morning breakfast with Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, to watching the 2024 State of the Union live from the White House and meeting President Biden and First Lady Jill Biden all in the same night, each day was jam-packed with adventure, knowledge and a new perspective on government. Deep in the heart of our country, in institutions like the White House, United States Supreme Court, Pentagon, Department of State, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and Department of Justice, I am honored to have had the surreal opportunity to engage with every aspect of the United States government, alongside 103 other delegates who have already made indelible marks on the world.

Skimming through my notebook, I am still in pure awe of the pages filled with jotted quotes from Supreme Court Justice Kagan and her anecdotes of her friendship with former Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, quick sketches of the allegorical figures carved into the marble walls of the Supreme Court, and notes detailing advice from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Brown, Jr. Each and every one of these pages sheds a new, comprehensive perspective into the United States Government. While I once thought of our government as fixed and uniform, this transformative week in Washington, D.C. taught me the exact opposite: our government is a living, breathing, complex entity that requires input from each and every branch, department, and bureau. It is dynamic, and will flourish to reflect only the discourse, votes, legislation, and dreams we supply. Assistant Attorney General (AAG) Kristen Clarke tapped into this idea while sharing the complexity of cases the Department of Justice encounters. From working with the Alabama Department of Public Health on a case that left Black residents in Lowndes County without access to proper waste systems, to investigating discrimination cases against kindergarteners with disabilities in a Florida school district, the Department of Justice is broadly emblematic of the intricacies of the United States government, and its steadfast commitment to preserving democracy – not as one entity, but an interconnected and vast system that strives to protect the sanctity of each and every community.

When I think back to my fondest memories of Washington Week, I’m immediately drawn to those I shared with my Military Mentor group. During the very last night of the program, we discussed our roots, heritage, and culture — capturing the very essence of our identities. Similarly, when hearing from individuals such as President Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Librarian of Congress Dr. Carla Hayden to name a few, I found that each speaker started their remarks with one key aspect of their respective identities: their roots. All individuals, no matter how influential and powerful, began somewhere, and as Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg eloquently stated, “The further away I got from home, the more I realized how important it was to have one: a place where I was from.” I now see that no matter where we go, what we accomplish, or positions we hold...we all start somewhere, and that seemingly quotidian “somewhere,” might just be the most integral component of each of our stories. Born and raised in metro-Detroit, I am grateful to not only represent my hometown, but to have engaged with servant leadership to the highest extent.

Reminiscing over Washington Week, I will carry the importance of placing service at the forefront of every action, a sense of indebtedness and gratefulness, appreciating the roots and ideas of each person I encounter, and remembering the beautiful intricacies that serve as the foundations of our government. As someone who hopes to pursue a career in service as a physician in the public health field, I am excited to draw upon these lessons for years to come.

I am forever indebted to my own Military Mentor Captain Amelia Weaver of the United States Army for her unparalleled support and camaraderie throughout Washington Week, the renowned Mr. Jakub Mosur and Ms. Erin Lubin for capturing our memories, and of course, the Hearst Foundations for this unforgettable and indescribable experience.

Each time I look at my notebook, Senate badge, the number 62, or anything that even remotely resembles the United States Senate Youth Program, I'll be renewed with faith that the future of America is secured in the hands of the generation that will truly form a "more perfect union."