

Callia Fielding, AK – 2023

I originally applied for the United States Senate Youth Program as a junior, after receiving an email from my Superintendent that it was a “good opportunity.” When I first applied, I had no idea just how much of an opportunity it truly was. As I scrolled through photos and researched the program, I became increasingly more intrigued and excited about the possibilities that it presented. In the end, I wasn’t selected as a delegate that year. But I had become so interested in the program from my research that I was determined to apply again the following year, and when February came around, I suddenly found myself preparing for a trip to Washington, D.C.

As Washington Week began to approach, I was terrified of what I would be met with. I felt like I had gotten in based off pure luck and was sure that I was going to struggle to interact and become friends with students who I worried outshined me, in knowledge, passion, and achievements. But as I sat down at a table in the beautiful Grand Ballroom Saturday morning, and got to know the other delegates, I realized quickly that I had it wrong. Everyone I met was easy to interact with, excited, and just as scared as I was. By the time Saturday dinner approached, as we sat in the ballroom listening to our first speaker, I could feel myself surrounded by a kind and welcoming community of delegates.

The full week feels like a dream. Every morning we would wake up before the sun rose, ready for another packed schedule. We spent our days walking around the nation’s capital, having the opportunity to meet with astounding speakers, while having our meals in some of the most beautiful, and famous, places in the capital. I can remember hurriedly writing everything down in my notebook, not wanting to miss a single piece of advice. Senate Secretary Ann Berry encouraged us to focus on ourselves and the journey to our goals, and said that with that, we would eventually find ourselves at success. The U.S. Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, advised us to not lose sight of the people around us while we work towards our goals, saying: “Strength is about our ability fundamentally to give and receive love, kindness, and generosity.” Being able to sit just feet away from people such as Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, and watch them truly listen and answer the questions and concerns of youth was a life-altering experience. Not only were our speakers at the top of their respective fields, but when listening to them, they genuinely cared about our questions and concerns. Whether a delegate asked for advice about a career field, or whether they were curious about a political event or process, each question was thoughtfully answered by our speakers.

One of the highlights of the program was our visit to the Supreme Court. Wanting to remember every part of it, I wrote down every detail I could remember, from the clock that hung above the seats of the justices, to the beautiful flower tiles that covered the ceiling. When Justice Sotomayor entered the room, the room was electrified with excitement. It’s impossible to describe the feeling that went through each of us, as she walked the Courtroom, coming close to give an in-depth answer to each delegate’s question. She gave us two pieces of advice that I know will stick with me for years. First, she encouraged us to ask questions. “There is a big difference between ignorance... and stupidity.” She said when you ask others for help with something, they’ll feel proud that you came to them, and pushed us to ask someone when we don’t understand something, so that we’ll have the chance to learn, instead of remaining in the dark. The second piece of advice she gave us was to try and find commonality with other people, especially those who we disagree with. She advised us to listen to viewpoints of others, and try to understand them, and even if we couldn’t, try to get along with them through something that we both agreed on. As the hour ran out and she began to leave, she said one last thing: “...I know someone is going to replace me. I just hope it’s someone like you. That would be enough for me.”

In the end, despite the growing inspiration I gained from every speaker, what stuck out most from the week was the people I was with. I have never felt more motivated and encouraged from a group of people than I did from the other delegates. Despite being sleep-deprived and exhausted, laughing and talking with them would keep me energized throughout each day. When the final day came around, and we had to say our goodbyes, I knew I had made connections I would carry with me throughout my college career, and my life.

It truly is impossible to encompass such an astonishing week in a matter of two pages. It's hard to even encompass it in over a thousand pictures, dozens of pages of notes, and long stories to my friends and family describing the experience. I came out of the week not only more knowledgeable, but with a revitalized hope and motivation for the future. I am extremely grateful for the staff, mentors, and speakers who made the entire week possible, as well as for the wonderful opportunity I was given. I cannot express enough how much I would encourage this program for any determined student passionate about public service. Washington Week truly was, as they all tell you, absolutely life-changing.