

## Ranen Miao, NJ – 2019

When asked what I hoped to pursue in college, I often joke: “Political science, because my dream is to be unemployed.” However, after a week in Washington, I’m reminded of why I care about activism, about debate, and about fighting for what I believe in: the beauty in serving others. From learning from our Military Mentors to internalizing the words of our speakers, my experience during Washington Week has amplified my desire to impact others through policy.

Every moment at Washington Week will teach you something. Our speakers taught us about bipartisanship, empathy, and humility. Never forget where you came from and care about the people you represent. Listen with an open mind and respect, but also fight for what you believe in. Through conversations with our Military Mentors and fellow delegates, I contextualized what I read in articles with lived experience: from talking about FISA courts to gun control, I learned more about how our government worked. From our lavish meals to beautiful rooms, I remembered how many people in America didn’t have the same privileges: from the millions who are homeless each night, to the one in six people who face hunger in America. Washington Week made what I’ve studied real. As I sat, listened, and learned, I also thought about the future, and how I could empower those around me as well.

I want to end my reflection with what Senator Ernst called one of the most important tenets of leadership: gratitude.

To our Military Mentors: thank you for your service to our nation, your inspiring experiences, and the lessons you taught us. Your insight enriched my understanding of government, and deepened my resolve to serve our nation in the future as well.

To our speakers: thank you for your time in sharing what you’ve learned with us. Your stories, words, and wisdom are lessons I will carry with me into the future. I won’t ever forget your calls to action for us to find our own way of influencing the world.

To the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) staff: thank you for your tireless work, dedication, and passion for USSYP. This program truly changes lives. To the New Jersey Department of Education: thank you for giving me the honor of representing our great state at Washington Week. I am deeply grateful for these experiences.

To Jakub and Erin: thank you for capturing every moment. Your photos still bring a smile to my face when I remember each small part of Washington Week, from the Newseum to the State Department to the White House. Thank you for immortalizing our memories.

Most importantly, to my fellow changemakers, student leaders, and dreamers: thank you for inspiring me. In a time of division and hate, it’s often hard to believe that people from opposite sides of the political spectrum can reconcile their differences and debate with mutual respect. Turn on the news, and you’ll be inundated with unpleasant headlines about insulting tweets, xenophobic demagoguery, or senseless acts of violence. You have restored my hope for the political future of our nation. From debates over the dinner table to talking on the bus, you all represent the best of what politics could be in America: mutual respect and civility. Even if we disagree, I know we have shared values: in building a better future.

Thank you for giving me a home: of people who are as politically engaged as I am, as passionate as I am, and as dedicated to service as I am. Washington Week was an unparalleled experience, but all of you are what made it so unforgettable. Sitting in the Mayflower in a room with future congresspeople, presidents, ambassadors, CEOs, activists, judges, and leaders, I felt a part of something bigger than myself: a generation and a cohort of people who are destined to go out there to change the world.

For future generations who are applying to USSYP: this program is everything you will dream of and more. The people you will meet, speak to, and hear from will challenge your beliefs, refine your opinions, and maybe even change how you see the world. You'll build friendships that will carry way beyond your week together, and you'll get to see the lessons of your history books and government classes.

I'm so excited to see everything us and our generation will achieve. In the words of Deputy Director of National Intelligence, Susan Gordon: "a life that matters will always be enough."

Let's go out there and change the world!