

## Edan Kauer, PA – 2024

Going into Washington Week, I was intimidated by the other delegates because I had read many of their bios and knew they were all amazing students and leaders in their communities. I distinctly remember doubting myself for many weeks before the program. However, from the first time I stepped into the Mayflower ballroom, I immediately felt welcome and accepted by everybody there. The first day was a fantastic whirlwind, and I talked to many delegates from around the country; everyone was brilliant, kind, and genuinely curious. Despite everyone's monumental achievements, I never felt out of place or intimidated when asking speakers questions or talking politics with other delegates. Once I got there, I made countless friends and had deep conversations. I remember talking with one delegate about his political views. Although we disagreed on each other's stances, he told me about his personal life and the challenges he overcame to get into the program, which deeply inspired me. I continue to be in awe of him and hope to work with him one day in the government or political roles we end up in. Partisanship did not separate or stop us from engaging in meaningful conversations and ultimately changed my viewpoint about how I have been villainizing other political parties. Through Washington, I learned the values of bipartisanship, collaboration, and compromise.

I also profoundly enjoyed talking with all the Military Mentors there. All of them opened my eyes to what military service looks like and how close-minded I had been about joining the military before coming to Washington. I was especially inspired by my Military Mentor, Captain Durbin, who is humble and down to earth; despite her incredible achievements and service, she always made me feel comfortable opening up to her. I also love talking to Captain Grizzle, my role model, and we had great conversations about the realities of military service and where life can take you. It was also amazing to hear from Major Tran about her work in the space force, how she handles nuclear threats from space, and how she defends our country against a possible nuclear weapon attack scenario. Captain McGurkin shifted my mindset and views on military and civil service. What he said continues to stick with me. When my coach was on the way to the Arlington cemetery, he told us about two things we must remember. One: "It's not about you". Military and or public service is never about the individual, the paycheck, or the glory of it; it is all about serving the American people as countless generations of Americans have. He always taught us to ask, "Am I doing everything I can?" to ensure we are giving our all, not only for the rules. We serve, but for the people we serve as well. He and the rest of the military mentors continue to inspire me and are one of the main reasons I plan to pursue public service.

Lastly, Washington Week ultimately strengthened my conviction to pursue civil rights in public service. I was inspired by watching the State of the Union in the White House and then meeting President Joe Biden afterward. It showed me the importance of young people getting involved in politics as we are our nation's future leaders and policymakers. Another memorable moment of Washington week was our visit to the Department of Justice, where I heard from Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke and her fellow attorneys about their work prosecuting the murders of Ahmad Arbery. Their experiences in stories thoroughly inspired me to continue pursuing my advocacy for marginalized groups and pursue a career in civil rights law. I still remember sitting down in the Department of Justice building and feeling utterly amazed by the panelists and the experiences I was about to have. Even though it had been a long few days before, an early morning, and already a long day, I was suddenly reinvigorated before the speakers came out, as this reaffirmed my passion for social justice issues and advocacy. Seeing and hearing that this was an avenue I could pursue in the future excites and inspires me to aggressively and continuously pursue this path. Thanks to the experiences of Washington Week and the support of my fellow delegates, Military Mentors, and community, the U.S. Senate Youth Program showed me the immense and indescribable value of surrounding myself with brilliant people, listening, always being curious, and pursuing genuine conversations. Being around many young and driven leaders, I learned that our nation has a bright and hopeful future. I no longer view leadership responsibility as a burden; it excites me to pursue with my fellow delegates. I can't wait until we reunite in government roles and leadership positions in the future. Washington week has been unforgettable, and I will carry these friendships and connections into my future.