

Ryan Hafener, ME – 2024

I've always had a desire to go into politics. From a young age, I remember hearing flashes of NPR reports on the Federal Reserve or CNN broadcasts on the State Department and wanting to know more. I like to credit the start of my journey in the field with a sixth-grade Student Council election that I lost. I was brand new to the school at the time, and realizing that my loss came as less of a referendum on my ideas and more as a comment on my recentness, I decided to run again a few months later, when a vacancy opened up.

Flash forward four years and I had the opportunity to apply for a student member position on my State Board of Education. Having nothing to lose, I went for it. After moving through several rounds, my progression to the next seeming increasingly unlikely in my mind, I got a call from the Governor's Office informing me I was her nominee for the position. At 15, I had my first Senate confirmation hearing and vote. Ever since, I haven't been able to get enough of politics.

Certain memories have stuck with me intensely in the two years since that first phone call. Visits to schools and teachers across the state with the State Board. Conversations with hundreds of Mainers as I knocked doors in some of the most rural parts of the state. My time at the State House working legislative affairs for the Maine Department of Education and months later, watching the State of the State from the speaker's chambers.

Even with a clear desire to go into politics and a decent knowledge of the areas I wanted to work in, Washington Week was beyond transformational. From watching the State of the Union at the White House to simulating a diplomatic crisis deep within the Department of State, the experiences I had the honor of sharing with the 103 other delegates now top that list.

Looking back, there are so many moments that stood out for the insight they provided, the energy they inspired, and, for lack of a better word, their sheer awesomeness. Asking Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg a question about a story that broke in *Politico Playbook* earlier that morning is certainly among them. So was hearing from Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Assistant Secretary of State Naz Durakoğlu, individuals who epitomize dedication to advancing America's foreign policy interests and the ideals of sovereignty, freedom, and democracy.

Watching the State of the Union from the White House certainly fits that bill—a highlight of the week for myself and countless other delegates. The Senate reception, no matter how much my feet hurt afterward, provided invaluable bonding time with other delegates and an opportunity to have meaningful conversations with Senators King and Collins about my future plans and the importance of community.

From USSYP Alumni Brian Kamoie to Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough, the speakers we had throughout the week continually impressed me with their relentless pursuit of excellence, dedication to service, and ability to connect with the group. Many showed a genuine desire to connect with me and my fellow delegates in a show of mutual respect that left me incredibly impressed. It takes a certain type of leader to recognize the power their position has to inspire others and the value of engaging with the next generation of leaders.

Though describing the events of Washington Week is far from easy, what's a lot harder to put into words is the impact that came from the people surrounding me throughout the week—one an order of magnitude greater than any one place, event, or speech could ever have.

What truly made the week what it was and the experiences exceptional was sharing them with a group as passionate, inspiring, curious, and genuinely kind as my co-delegates and military mentors. Through candid conversations and shared meals with the Military Mentors, I gained a better understanding of what service means to me. Talking with military diplomats, White House briefers, and nuclear engineers—all program mentors—I realized that the defining characteristics of a leader aren't necessarily those of mastery in a specific area. Instead, they are core principles like respect, an emphasis on clear communication, and an openness to criticism, new ideas, and opportunity.

Two pages can't do my fellow delegates justice when it comes to their passion, expertise, and impact. I hope one example can suffice in representing dozens of other experiences I had with the delegates from the program. During the week, I became close friends with a delegate from Hawaii, bonding over our shared experiences as student members on our respective state's Boards of Education. The turning point in our friendship came at the Senate Reception where we shared the stories behind our leadership roles, our hopes for the future, and insights on navigating education policy.

I had the same experience with countless other delegates, connecting over experiences in state legislatures, on campaigns, or even something as small as a mutual appreciation for Phoebe Bridgers. Leaving Washington was hard. But knowing that the bonds formed during the week would stay strong eased the pain caused by thousands of miles of physical separation. In the weeks that have followed, I've watched my friends and fellow delegates as they've planned out the next step in their individual futures. When it comes to our collective future, I know that the shared experiences we had during Washington Week have pushed us to envision and given us the tools to work towards a better future—together.

Towards the start of the program, my Military Mentor introduced our group to a key principle of his—and one that kept me grounded and present throughout Washington Week. Introduced to him during a high-stakes moment in a briefing on Naval nuclear systems, it applied equally to Washington Week's moments of laughter, reflection, and connection. If I had to give a piece of advice to next year's delegates, it would be the same one that Lt. Clay Shepherd gave to me that morning:

“Be where you are.”