

Landen Coursey, AR – 2025

March 1, 9:36am

My dad: "You've been at the airport for a while. No ride?"

Me: "No, we just had to wait for some other delegates to get here. Leaving now."

I didn't know it yet, but that bus ride from Reagan Airport was the start of a week that would change my life. It was the start of a week that would connect me to people that would change my entire point of view. It was the start of a week that would reassure my faith in the future of America.

This was the start of Washington Week.

Since I have been home, people continue to ask, "What was the best part of it all?" Was it Mount Vernon? Was it the National Archives? Was it being inside NASA? Was it touring the White House? Was it the Pentagon?

While all of these places are amazing, my answer has continued to be the same: the best part was the people. From delegates to distinguished guests, from Military Mentors to program staff, and from the security team to the catering staff, every single person made an impact on my life that I consider immeasurable. Whether it was wisdom, humor, insightful conversation, or just plain kindness, no interaction was ever wasted, and this is what I believe makes Washington Week so incredible.

I'll start with the staff, since they were the ones with whom I first encountered. The catering and meal team were kind, attentive, and always willing to help and accommodate us in any way they could. It didn't matter if we were at the Mayflower, an office building, or the Institute of Peace, these men and women always found a way to give us a world-class experience that most of us will probably never see again. Furthermore, the security staff almost became like friends to us. They were there at every turn, always ensuring that we were cared for and safe. They basically made all of the delegates feel like we were the President, and that just increased the caliber and excitement of Washington Week even more.

Then there was the staff from the program and from the Hearst Foundations. Oh there is so much to say. There's nurse Rose, who never failed to aid the delegates in any, and I mean any, way we needed. There was the entire behind-the-scenes team, who organized the entire week, from travel to tours, and from hotels to social media. This team was so kind and truly wanted the absolute best for every delegate in attendance.

I want to also give a special shout out to Ms. Rayne Guilford, Ms. Wendy Wilk, Ms. Donna Lagani, and Mr. Jonathan Bissell. Ms. Guilford's electric energy and welcoming spirit was never lost on any of the delegates throughout this week, and I am so proud to have been able to have been a member of her final class of the program. Ms. Wilk was always willing to reach out and provide any advice, assistance, or share a story with any of the delegates, and I look forward to her leadership of Senate Youth in the future. Ms. Lagani was genuinely one of the most real and welcoming people I've ever met (she even helped change the Arkansas delegation's return flights when she heard that we were going to have a very short layover). Then there's JB. He arguably gave us the most well-known and frequently-repeated quotes of the week. Let me list them out:

- "Delegates and distinguished guests"
- "Dinner (or lunch) is served."
- "We certainly look forward to your continued support for the United States Senate Youth Program."
- And of course, "THE George Washington University."

Next are the Military Mentors. I have so much admiration for these individuals. Representing every branch of the U.S. military, these leaders truly showed us not only how to serve our country, but also how to serve our neighbor on a smaller scale. There really is too much to say about each mentor, but I want to acknowledge just how much they are doing for our nation, and the lessons that I took away from each and every one of them will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Finally, the delegates. There was just something special about this group of students. The only way I can put it is that everyone was just a good person. Everyone wanted the best for each other. No one was jealous of anyone else. Every single delegate was there for the same reason: to grow as a leader and to make connections with the best that our nation has to offer. It was amazing to be around such kind, thoughtful, innovative, and passionate students, and I am so proud of how we all grew as one cohort. I watched every delegate broaden their perspective, open their mind, and accept the lessons and opinions of others, which encompassed a broad range of ideals across the political spectrum. There are many things that I know for certain about this class:

- I met some of my lifelong best friends at Washington Week.
- I met our nation's future medical leaders, Senators, and Cabinet members.
- And of course, our class is the best class to walk through the Mayflower doors.

Like I said, I didn't know it, but that bus ride from Reagan Airport was the start of a week that would change my life. The lessons I learned, the people I met, and the experiences I witnessed in Washington Week are ones that I will never forget.

While the delegates may be back in our individual states and communities, I know for certain that this program will remain an integral part of our one wild and precious life.

March 8, 8:42am

Me: Getting ready to take off.

My dad: Got it. Glad it was a great week in DC.