

Sophia Lin, AZ –2025

I'll never forget the first time I opened the official Washington Week agenda, my fingers flipping the glossy pages with furor to see what the upcoming week had in store. There in fine print lay names I had only previously seen on news headlines and weekly newspapers. Names of people I would get to meet over the span of the next few days.

As each day passed, celebrated names printed on a gleaming agenda changed into real people with real stories just as quickly as unknown names printed on delegate name tags slowly turned into lifelong friends. The most beautiful part of the sudden influx of people, both old and young, was being able to draw striking comparisons between the two.

On the first day, my apprehension towards belonging in a group of 104 passionate changemakers was eased by an energizing conversation led by Bill Doherty, co-founder of Braver Angels, encouraging each and every one of us to partake in civil discourse despite ever-increasing political separation. In him, I saw my own co-delegate, Cameron, who works to dismantle these same barriers on our own high school campus.

On day 3, I had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to hear from Associate Justice Kavanaugh in the very room where some of our nation's most important decisions are ruled upon. After bonding with him about the analogy of looking at life through the lens of refereeing a soccer game, my roommate, Seyi from Tennessee, told me about her own aspirations to be a justice. In Justice Kavanaugh, I saw Seyi's passionate charisma and her constant search for justice.

On day 6, my eyes were opened to the expansive universe around me—literally and figuratively—as we heard from NASA's Crew 71 Expedition Astronauts. When we returned to the hotel that night, my Military Mentor, LCDR Niemann told us about how she has always dreamed of becoming an astronaut, a reminder of the constant pursuit of dreams no matter what age. I saw my Military Mentor, now one of the Navy's newest space mentors, in each one of the astronauts, their mental resilience reflected through their physical abilities.

On day 7, a series of changes to the schedule, a reminder of the fast-paced life that is politics, resulted in an impromptu meeting with Senator Amy Klobuchar. As she mirrored similar thoughts of previous speaker Jeanne Shaheen, she emphasized the importance of working across the political aisle to enact real, meaningful change. As I reflected upon her words afterwards with Chris from Nevada, we talked about how their speeches re-instilled our dreams to serve in the Senate. Once dampened by fear, my dreams have not only been rekindled but invigorated by the hope that was vocalized to be possible through Senators Klobuchar and Shaheen. More than anything, they prioritize *policy* over *party*, always seeking to put *people* first, and in their pursuit of this, I see Chris, and I see myself.

On day 8, Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, shared his own journey through the world of defense and his plans to ensure that America rebuilds the military and supports our strongest defenders. As Lizzie from Pennsylvania asked a deeply specific and astonishingly impressive question, quickly followed by Hegseth jokingly offering her a D.O.D. job, I saw her inquisitive nature and thirst for knowledge in his passion for the same as he claimed how "he loves to hire "people who are smarter than him."

Just like Secretary Hegseth, I aim for intellectual inferiority if it means being surrounded by greatness, forever pushing me towards academic abundance. I had the incredible honor of representing Arizona among the smartest people I know. These five experiences I could draw parallels between were just fleeting snapshots of a beautiful landscape, displaying the vast potential of my fellow delegates.

The impact of the people I met wasn't just derived from the ones with names who lined my newspapers. I felt the same impact from my very own peers, my fellow delegates whose eyes shared the same sparkle as the acclaimed politicians and changemakers that came to enlighten us. As I found fascinating connections between the people I met, I also found traits I admired most, traits I hope to carry within me. Despite only spending a week together, I know that as I continue to watch as the adolescent naivete of my peers transforms into cultivated wisdom over the years, their careers will soon develop into ones that will eventually inspire the next generation of Senate Youth delegates.

The next time I open up the Washington Week agenda, a few years down the row, I hope to be filled with the same furor, but instead to see the names of my own peers, the true leaders of tomorrow, lining the pages. The next time I hear the phrase "Delegates and distinguished guests...", I plan to see the *delegates* of today as the *esteemed guests* of tomorrow.