

## **Sarah Gao, CA – 2025**

I found out I was selected as a delegate for the 63<sup>rd</sup> United States Senate Youth Program in the most on-brand way possible: I missed the notification calls (yep, true DND warrior style). Three missed calls later, there was nothing I could do—except go to Taco Bell with my friend to stress-eat nacho fries. I finally found out the next day during AP Econ. Honestly, it was the perfect start to USSYP: a little chaotic, very memorable, and absolutely worth it.

Flying in from the West Coast meant I showed up in the middle of the first dinner, one of the last to arrive. But from the moment I walked into the Grand Ballroom of The Mayflower, I was welcomed like I'd been there from the start. Conversations sparked instantly. Everyone was passionate, curious, and genuinely kind. We clicked fast, and by the end of the week, the 104 of us shared over 5,100 photos in a giant PhotoCircle.

Every moment felt worth remembering—from late-night conversations to line dancing in the mezzanine to obsessing over the desserts (the white chocolate capitol dome dessert was iconic, but the berry cheesecake was my absolute favorite).

One of the most surreal parts of the week was walking into the Supreme Court for the first time. The courtroom was stunning—ionic columns of white marble, coffered ceilings, deep red drapes. The friezes lining the upper walls showed figures like Moses, Confucius, and Hammurabi—lawgivers from different cultures and centuries, symbolizing the roots of justice across history. I even got to ask Justice Brett Kavanaugh a question, and he responded about the “courage to change your mind.” That idea—being open-minded enough to shift your views—really stuck with me. In a world where standing your ground is often seen as strength, he reminded us that true leadership requires humility and growth.

Washington Week was packed. Throughout the week, we met leaders across every sector. Secretary of State Marco Rubio encouraged us to find that sweet spot between what we're good at and what we love. At NASA, I had the honor of introducing Expedition 71 astronauts: Mr. Matthew Dominick, Dr. Michael Barratt, Dr. Tracy Caldwell Dyson, and Dr. Janette Epps (coincidentally enough, I had previously met Dr. Epps virtually while she was onboard the ISS during the Regeneron ISEF). STEM can be a form of public service—another takeaway that reshaped how I see impact.

Throughout Wash Week, we met people I'd only ever seen on TV or read about in class. Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Cory Booker, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth—they weren't headlines or soundbites anymore. They were real people sitting right in front of us, answering our questions directly. It made politics feel real in a way it hadn't before.

If there was one thing every speaker emphasized, it was the importance of listening. In a time where it feels like everyone is trying to talk over each other, the ability to actually listen—and not just wait for your turn to speak—is imperative in fostering connection and meaningful progress.

But more than the speakers or the institutions, it was the people who made Washington Week what it was. Every delegate brought something different to the table—ideas, humor, accents, snacks, keychains, pins, and much, much more from their homes—and I truly loved getting to know all of them. Being a part of this incredible USSYP community is something I'll cherish forever.

I left DC with a full heart, a full camera roll, and a full belly. The lessons I learned about leadership, courage, and listening aren't ones I'll leave in Washington. I'll carry them with me, in every conversation, every decision, and every attempt at making the world just a little better.

Also, if public service doesn't work out, I'm seriously considering becoming a professional dessert critic.