

## Grace Ackerman, CT – 2025

“What is one piece of advice you would give to a Connecticut Delegate prior to going to Washington Week?”

“Be prepared to be surrounded by 103 Grace Ackermans.”

Those were the words of Mr. Stephen A. Armstrong, the Connecticut contact for the United States Senate Youth Program, at the conclusion of my finalist interview in November. At the time, I could not fully grasp the significance of his remark. Coming from a small coastal town in Connecticut, I had rarely encountered individuals who shared the same passion for public service or civic engagement. The prospect of being surrounded by 103 like-minded peers was both exciting and admittedly intimidating. In December, Mr. Armstrong came to my high school to announce my selection for the program. At the end of our conversation, he shook my hand and said, “It appears you’re about to find out what 103 other Graces Ackermans look like.”

Arriving in Washington, D.C. for the first time, I was unsure of what to expect. What I quickly discovered was that I was not just surrounded by high-achieving high school students—I was in the company of young leaders eager to learn, share ideas, and of course, outfit details. As the days went on, it became clear that the 104 delegates in the 63<sup>rd</sup> class of the United States Senate Youth Program were not just a group of talented individuals—we were a family, bound by shared experiences, Peter’s pins and a mutual commitment to public service and civic engagement.

One of the most unique and impactful moments was the opportunity to meet with Associate Justice Kavanaugh in the Supreme Court. He spoke about the importance of understanding and making decisions based on our own moral compass, especially when others might disagree. Sitting in the chamber where landmark decisions shaping the nation had been made, I could not help but be in awe of the intricate gold-framed ceilings and the stately stonework. It was a moment of being immersed in an environment that felt both esteemed and authentic, unlike anything I had felt before. Later, I was captivated by the stories shared by NASA astronauts from Crew 71. They spoke about resilience, teamwork, and the ability to find excitement even in the most challenging or discouraging environments. They even showed us videos of them participating in “Space Olympics” as a way to boost morale during their missions. A phrase shared during the conference resonated deeply with me: “If you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together.” This reaffirmed the value of collaboration and encouragement—principles that I saw in action throughout the week with my fellow Senate Youth delegates.

Perhaps the most humbling aspect of the experience was the humanization of politics. Sitting just a few feet away from some of the most powerful leaders in the United States, I was reminded that they, too, were once just people like me—seventeen years old with big dreams of making a difference. They shared their personal journeys, their mistakes, the lessons they’ve learned along the way, and in one case, their humorous frustrations with soccer referees. Hearing their stories was a powerful reminder that the individuals behind the policies we often debate are, at the end of the day, just people—people who experience the same doubts, fears, and struggles as we do. They are sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, and fellow humans—just with sharper signatures and the ability to make decisions that affect millions.

While I deeply appreciated the tours, speeches, and, of course, the four-course meals with live bands, what resonated with me the most were the delegates. 104 passionate, brilliant, and accomplished teenagers, each working toward their own goals and striving to make a positive impact in their communities. They were highly successful yet simultaneously supportive and kind, ready to share an Alani Nu to combat your three hours of sleep or wrap their arms around you when a hug was most needed. I have been endlessly impressed by the encouragement radiated by the 63<sup>rd</sup> class of United States Senate Youth delegates, whether it’s celebrating college acceptances, new leadership positions, or the fact that a delegate discovered their new favorite boba spot. From my small town in Connecticut, I no longer feel isolated in my passion but rather inspired by the 103 like-minded individuals who unintentionally motivated me to become a more confident, driven, supportive, and civically-minded American.

It’s been four months since Mr. Armstrong told me that I’d be surrounded by 103 other Grace Ackermans, and now I finally understand what that means.