

Ella York, FL – 2025

As I look back on my time at the U.S. Senate Youth Program, I can't help but be amazed at the profound and concrete impact it has had on my life.

I refuse to use anything but my USSYP water bottle and backpack, I shamelessly display my pin on my school lanyard, and I wake up every morning to the sight of the many mementos I collected during Washington Week scattered across my desk. I'm sure my friends at home are sick of my almost pitiful pining over what was undoubtedly the best week of my life.

But for me, Senate Youth is so much more than a seven-day trip to our nation's capital. It's the most kind and understanding group of friends I've ever had, it's the inspirational Military Mentors, and it's a calling to serve the greatest nation on earth. As a Florida delegate, I had the distinct honor of introducing Secretary of State Marco Rubio alongside my co-delegate, easily the most surreal experience of my life. I also got to meet Florida Senator Ashley Moody, and we connected in our matching 'power pink' suits. That personal moment will stay with me for the rest of my life.

But before I even packed my suitcase, Senate Youth changed the course of my life. I was a junior when I found the application for Senate Youth and spent the next month pouring over constitutional theory and public policy as I prepared my application. When I was invited to Tallahassee for finalist interviews and the exam, I was ecstatic. A month later, I got a phone call. My heart was racing, and my voice was shaky as I learned I was an alternate. I was both thrilled and crushed, so close but so far. I spent the next year doing everything I could to better myself and my application, all in hopes of being named a delegate. I met so many incredible people as I dived deeper into Debate, Model UN, and my desire to serve. I even got to know my fellow Florida alternate, Terry Shen, with whom I bonded and built a strong connection with.

One year, many essays, and another interview later, I received another phone call. I cried as I was told I was named as one of the Florida Delegates for the 2025 Senate Youth Program. I jumped when I learned that my co-delegate would be Terry Shen; I knew we'd be the perfect team to represent the Sunshine State.

As I'm sure you can imagine, at this point I'd heard so many stories and read essays just like this one that set my expectations for Washington Week rather high. I had connected with the previous year's Florida delegates, Brittany Berlin and Maurits Acosta, both of whom raved about their experience emphatically. Everything I had heard seemed so utopian and incredible, but there was still a small part of me that cynically doubted that one week could be as impactful as everyone claimed USSYP would be.

I have never been more wrong in my life, and I will forever be grateful for that.

Our first day felt like a blur; I was so thrilled to finally be there, and meeting my fellow delegates on that first night was just the best experience. I was so excited to finally meet my roommate, and I spent hours going around and asking everyone if they'd heard of anyone else in room 665. Eventually, just as everyone piled into the Mayflower ballroom for our first speaker, I found my amazing roommate and sat down, in awe of the week I was about to have. Bill Doherty's anti-polarization remarks inspired me to have an open mind and truly set the tone for a transformative experience.

The next morning, and we were taking in the beautiful nature of George Washington's Mount Vernon, which felt unreal as we took refuge in this peaceful estate, just a short drive away from the bustle of the city. Wandering the halls of the National Portrait Gallery with my new best friends let us all connect over our collective geeky enthralment in the collection of presidential portraits. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention my own pride in taking no less than three pictures with JFK portraits throughout the week.

Mr. Brian Kamoie of Deloitte brought us all together the next morning with his question to us, "What will you do with your one wild and precious life?" Yes, I know it's a Mary Oliver quote, but it will always mean Senate Youth to me. Never before have I been surrounded by so many accomplished, like-minded individuals that want to dedicate their lives to service, so many people just like me. While our agenda was incredible, the best part of this program was undoubtedly the people I got to experience it with. Had it not been for my fellow delegates, our military mentors, and other USSYP staff, Washington Week wouldn't have been close to the amazing week it was.

I'll never be able to see D.C. the same way again. So many sites and monuments in Washington have taken on a new meaning for me. While this was not my first trip to D.C., nothing has left the same mark on this city quite like Senate Youth.

Now, as I remember the Supreme Court, I can reminisce about meeting an actual Supreme Court Justice in the courtroom itself. For a building that already feels like the holy temple of law, that experience somehow made it seem even more majestic. I can put a face to the titles of 'Librarian of Congress' and 'Senate Historian,' two incredibly inspiring women that felt like kindred spirits, what with our shared love of history and knowledge. These were truly unique experiences, and I know that I am privileged to have had this incredible opportunity.

Nothing, however, changed my perspective quite like our visit to the State Department.

As someone intent on pursuing a career in foreign service, walking through the entrance to see the flags lining the walls was like something out of a movie. The rooms we saw were gorgeous and stately, with historic art, portraits, and artifacts (including Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre!). While we waited for our lunch to start, my co-delegate and I rehearsed our lines for the final time before introducing the Secretary of State. Standing at the podium and watching Secretary Rubio walk into the room was surreal; getting to shake hands with someone so influential in shaping foreign policy was a moment I'll never forget. For me, this was the pinnacle of the week, the product of all the work I'd put in to get there; and after waiting a year as an alternate, the impact was that much more powerful. I get emotional just thinking about it now.

I could go on and on about every amazing, once-in-a-lifetime moment I got to experience thanks to Senate Youth. Honestly, I could probably write a book just about all the amazing people I met throughout the week. But this is a reflection, not a retelling. You'd think I'd be sick of writing essays by now, but my genuine love for Senate Youth is just overflowing. I know that I will probably never get to experience something like USSYP ever again, but I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to share these memories with the most special group of people I know. As Justice Kavanaugh reminded us, "Always live on the sunrise side of the mountain, to see the day that is coming, not the day that has passed."

I will strive to live the rest of my life on the sunrise side of the mountain. I hope this has inspired any Senate Youth-hopefuls to apply for this incredible program. I had no idea what I was in for when I first did, and it has changed my life forever. I encourage you to take a leap of faith; you never know, you might end up eating lunch with the Secretary of State.