

## **Terry Shen, FL – 2025**

As an American, I have long cherished learning about our country's rich history—from the creation of our democratic government to our Founding Fathers' virtuous intention to serve the people.

The United States Senate Youth Program is a one-week long, nonpartisan, secular, education-oriented, inside-look at our government and our country's leaders. To me, it was an eye-opening experience unlike any other. Everyone we met, from our speakers to our Military Mentors, further demonstrated to me how distinct voices, backgrounds, and stories come together to define America.

Hearing from and asking questions to top officials from all three branches of government—a Supreme Court Justice, Cabinet members, Senators, and more—showed me the inner workings of our government. I even had the immense privilege to introduce Secretary of State Marco Rubio in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room alongside my co-delegate from Florida. Listening to perspectives and stories from government-adjacent speakers—a journalist, nonprofit leader, philanthropist, and more—demonstrated how our government truly derives its power from the consent of the governed. Our speakers spoke on bipartisanship in Congress, their opinions and beliefs, and advice on preparing ourselves for the future.

An unforgettable and amazing part of our week was time spent with our Military Mentors. They taught us important life lessons and made the week truly special. I appreciate the program's long-standing connection with our service members, each of whom showed us what service means to themselves uniquely. The program staff, each with their own call to service that led them to Washington Week, elevated my experiences as well. Conversations ranging from pragmatic advice to philosophical ideals encouraged us to think critically.

During the program, I was honored to be selected by my peers to represent our delegation as one of two Farewell Address Keynote speakers. It was truly a special privilege to speak on behalf of my peers after getting to better know their dreams, hopes, and aspirations. My fellow delegates—some of the most impressive people I now have the privilege to call friends—were the highlight of my week. I found a collection of intelligent, hardworking, and accomplished individuals. Perhaps most importantly, I was thankful to see a virtue reflected by the collective group: kindness.

Should our nation's future leaders reflect the compassion embodied by the 63<sup>rd</sup> delegation—which I believe they will, considering the two groups are not mutually exclusive—our nation will be in good hands, as we will have a generation of leaders who put others before themselves. I am now more charged and inspired—hopeful for our future. I foresee my fellow delegates strengthening initiatives in their local communities, serving in state governments, representing constituents in Congress—perhaps even serving as the President of the United States. Whatever we choose to do, I hope we and the future leaders of our country never lose our humility, curiosity, and kindness.

Though, there is more to be done. As we traveled around our nation's capital and witnessed its grandeur, it is important to remember that we represent those back home who may not see what we see. The elders who cannot fight for themselves, the impoverished who work diligently each day, and the veterans who serve us—we must work for them, as “to whom much is given, much will be required.” This program reaffirmed to me that we join public service not to elevate our own standings, but to serve others.

I am grateful to the Hearst Foundations for enabling such a wonderful and unparalleled program. We genuinely appreciate the planning and support the Hearst Foundations has put in to encourage the youth of America to pursue public service. May we also remember to give back to others, always.

I believe one of the reasons our time together is named “Washington Week,” as opposed to the “United States Senate Youth Program Week” is because although our experiences together in Washington may only last a week, the relationships developed and lessons learned last a lifetime.

As we as a nation step towards our future through the gates of uncertainty, let us be united as a collective country. Let us strive for a better tomorrow with genuine compassion for all mankind, care for the progress of our country, and action towards a more peaceful world. Let us do so as President Abraham Lincoln remarked: “with charity towards all, with malice towards none.”