

Sophia Fu, IN – 2025

As I strolled through the terminals of Ronald Reagan International Airport, an uneasy feeling consumed my stride. I'd been to Washington, D.C. before, multiple times, but this time, something felt different. Strangers bustled beside me—cellphones balanced between shoulder and ear, Peet's coffee in hand—and the city buzzed with an unfamiliar hum. "This month, the energy has been different in the city," I overheard a man whispering to a friend. He was right—something *was* different.

In the weeks leading up to Washington Week, every headline I read seemed to echo the same message: political discord, federal gridlock, and widespread political polarization. Yet, that evening, as I sat in the Mayflower ballroom with my fellow 103 delegates, a different atmosphere began to take shape. Mr. Bill Doherty, co-founder of Braver Angels, opened the week with a powerful message, sharing his experiences bridging political divides through open dialogue and conversation. Later, Mr. Jonathan Bissell, our director of student activities, shared another message: the United States Senate Youth Program has persevered through presidential impeachments and Vietnam, civil unrest and international crises, pivotal moments in American history. And like the thousands of delegates who sat in these very seats before us, many in uncertain times, we, too, would find *hope*—hope in our government, hope in each other, and hope in the beauty of public service.

That hope deepened when we visited the Supreme Court. As Justice Kavanaugh entered the chamber, I was startled by how human he seemed—he wasn't the digital persona I'd seen on screens, but a father, a colleague, a man navigating uncertainty like the rest of us. Justice Kavanaugh spoke candidly about lunches he shared with his fellow Supreme Court justices (where, surprisingly, politics and work were off the table!) and his experiences being a sports dad and cheering on his daughters from the bench. As a young adult often facing uncertainty, Justice Kavanaugh's optimism also resonated with me: "Live on the sunrise side of the mountain," he shared, "to see the day that is coming and not the day that has passed."

Perhaps, one of my favorite parts of Washington Week was introducing Dr. Tracy Caldwell-Dyson and Dr. Jeanette Epps of NASA's Expedition 71 alongside my friend and fellow delegate, Sarah Gao. After their presentation, both astronauts came down from the stage, shook my hand, took a *selfie* with me, and remembered my name. I was enamored by their kindness: these were two women who had gone to *space*—a feat accomplished by fewer than 104 women in the history of mankind—yet they radiated pure humility and affection. Their grace reminded me that no matter where our careers, education, or commitments to public service take us, we must never forget to stay grounded, humble, and kind.

However, what made Washington Week unforgettable weren't just the famous faces we met, the historic institutions we toured, or the gold-adorned s'mores cakes we enjoyed at the Institute of Peace (although, I must admit: eating gold was a pretty cool experience!)—it was the *people*. Prior to Washington Week, I found myself reading many essays from former delegates, all of which had a recurring theme: friendship. I found myself thinking: Could I *really* become best friends with people in *only* a week? Indeed, I could. On my flight back to Indianapolis, as I watched the sunrise through the plane window and traced through my memories, I found myself thinking about the games of *We're Not Really Strangers* I enjoyed with my friends in the Mezzanine, our shared laughs over carrots and hummus at lunch, and the vulnerable late-night conversations I had with people, people who had been little more than strangers just days before.

On our final night, as we listened to the keynote speeches, waved our phone flashlights in synchronization, and hit our last moves on the dance floor, I realized that something *had* shifted. Though all of us came from distinct political, geographical, and ideological backgrounds, we were no longer strangers bounded by these ties and labels. We were *us*—young people who cared deeply about our country, people who believed in change, and people who cherished each other. We pulled all-nighters to spend our last moments together. And now, seconds, minutes, hours, and days later, I'm still amazed by the brilliance, selflessness, and kindness of every delegate I met.

Politics is not perfect. It's far from that. In fact, even the *framers* of our Constitution set out for our leaders to form "a *more* perfect Union," since *the* perfect Union does not exist. Despite the uncertainty I still carry—about who I am, where I'm going, and what the future holds—I now carry a renewed faith, too. Having met the brightest minds in our country—the future politicians, doctors, entrepreneurs, and changemakers—I have nothing but pure faith that our country is walking toward something good. Toward the sunrise side of the mountain.