

Jaelyn Woodley, MO -- 2025

If I could go back and relive Washington Week, I would do it in a heartbeat. I would leave my house at 3:00 AM, endure the delayed flights, and walk through the rain to NASA, all without hesitation. I would return to that incredible space where I met lifelong friends, experienced the weight of history, and discovered my own potential. Washington Week was more than just an event; it was a transformative week that shaped who I am and set the course for who I will become. As I sit here reflecting on those moments, I can't help but feel tears of gratitude. I weep for the memories, the friendships, and the lessons that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

The people I met during that week made all the difference. While my personality and drive certainly helped push my application forward, it was the people I encountered that truly made Washington Week unforgettable. I think back to Triya, my co-delegate from St. Louis, with her curly hair, her Indian heritage, and her wisdom. We FaceTime every night, and our conversations challenge and inspire me to think differently about the world. Through her, I see reflections of my own life—her ambitions, her strength, and her ability to take hold of a room. I remember walking with Triya through the White House, imagining it as our future home. It felt so real at that moment, and I could see us there, making a difference together. Then there's Prerana, from Bentonville, Arkansas—a powerhouse of intellect and insight. I remember sitting with her at the Department of State, where we discussed legislative affairs. She sat with me at the Mayflower and would hold my hand, from breakfast to dinners, infusing my life with warmth. Prerana is the true glue that holds our group together, reconciling disagreements at the Pentagon, reminding us to stay in the moment, or guiding us on track to live in the moment. Her advice was a constant source of comfort and guidance throughout the week.

Isaac, from Iowa, was another unforgettable soul. His deep passion for the Peace Corps and his work in helping underdeveloped countries left a lasting impression on me. Isaac's kindness, his care for others, and the warmth he exuded were like a beacon of light during those busy, intense days. Then there was Paarth, from Michigan, whose passion for climate change stemmed from his hometown of Kalamazoo. He works with legislators and conducts independent research on the effects of corporate waste on the environment. I remember steaming his clothes every morning, a small but meaningful routine that helped calm my nerves before a long day of uncertainty. Paarth's steady presence and humor made the days more bearable, lifting everyone's spirits and reminding us to find joy in the chaos. And finally, there was Landen, my fellow delegate from Arkansas, who introduced me to the complexities of bipartisanship and political discourse. Landen's joy was infectious, and I'll never forget the way he lit up when he saw a Crumbl Cookie box on day one.

This group of friends became my rock throughout Washington Week. We stayed up late in the Mezzanine, sharing laughs and stories, and supporting each other. Every night after lights out, we would FaceTime, continuing our conversations and maintaining the connection that had formed so quickly. I genuinely believe that our group was one of the most diverse and dynamic to come out of the 63rd Annual United States Senate Youth Program, and I'm proud to call them my friends.

Washington Week was not just about the friendships I made. It was about the profound experiences and the lessons I learned from the people I met and the places I visited. I remember meeting Dr. Carla Hayden, the first African American and the first woman to be appointed Librarian of Congress. As a student who is the second Black student body president at my school, I relate deeply to her struggles and triumphs as a trailblazer. I asked her how she dealt with being the first, and her response resonated with me on a level I will never forget. She told me the importance of having a strong support system—people who will push you to be your best and catch you when life gets difficult. In that moment, I felt seen. Dr. Hayden is a powerful Black woman, and the fact that I had the opportunity to hear her words of wisdom was a gift I will carry with me forever.

During Washington Week, I also had the chance to ask Brian Kamoie a question. When he asked, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" I was reminded of the importance of living in the moment. That week taught me how to embrace the present and not worry about the past or future. A simple, spontaneous moment that led to a picture of me laughing—a reminder that life is best when we allow ourselves to experience it fully, without the distractions of perfection or expectation.

One of the most profound moments of the week came when I stood in the halls of the Supreme Court. As I passed through security and walked quietly through the building, I stopped outside the courtroom and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath, remembering the brave individuals whose efforts paved the way for me to be there. Thurgood Marshall, who fought for *Brown v. Board of Education*, allowing me the privilege to walk those halls. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whose life was dedicated to fighting for justice, and *Roe v. Wade*, a case that continues to reverberate in today's polarized courts. I stood there in awe, honoring the legacy of those who came before me and the tremendous responsibility that I now carry as a young Black woman in America.

Another deeply moving experience was my opportunity to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. When I received the message that I would have the honor, my first thought was, "What do I wear?" But then, I remembered my father—my dad, a retired Army veteran who served in Desert Storm and across the world. I called him to tell him the news, and he responded with pride, saying my uncle had that same honor. That morning, I woke up to his text: "Represent for the young Black girls in these times." I walked through Arlington, laid the wreath, and felt the weight of our nation's history. I thought of the Black Americans who, like me, are often underrepresented in spaces of power and honor. And at that moment, I realized the significance of my presence, of my journey.

The week culminated in a visit to the White House, a place that felt both surreal and attainable. I took a picture with Senator Cory Booker just weeks before he made history by breaking the filibuster record, surpassing Strom Thurmond's infamous stand against the Civil Rights Act. I breathed the same air as Bernie Sanders, a man who has dedicated his life to American democracy and public service. The experiences and memories from Washington Week are beyond words, and I will carry them with me as I continue to grow as a leader and advocate.

I am forever grateful to the United States Senate Youth Program and the Hearst Foundations for providing me with this life-changing opportunity. Thank you to the Mayflower Hotel staff, whose hospitality made the experience even more special. Above all, thank you to the program for giving me the chance to not only learn from history but to make history with my peers. As I move forward, I remember the words that guided me throughout this journey: "If not you, then who? If not you, then don't complain."