

Shayleen Moeini, MS – 2025

With a single flip of a journal's page and glance at a glossy photograph's border of signatures, I instantly reminisce on my experience during Washington Week—one of the most powerful weeks of my life. I still vividly recall the day that I received a call from the Mississippi Department of Education with the news that I was selected as a delegate. Sitting at my desk, I immediately recognized the number and jumped up and down with excitement. I had dreamed of this moment for years, and I had prayed each day that I would be blessed with the honor of representing my home state, Mississippi, in the United States Senate Youth Program. At that moment, I was in disbelief, and as the days following the call went by, I asked myself one, singular question: "How will my perspective of leadership change by the time that I return home?"

As I began my journey to Washington, D.C. from the Gulfport-Biloxi International Airport, the answers to that question quickly materialized right in front of me. While apprehension and nervousness weighed in my heart, I was met with unwavering kindness and welcoming spirits from my fellow delegates from the moment that I stepped into the Mayflower Hotel. Not only did everyone have outgoing personalities filled with joy, but each person also had unique narratives to share from their backgrounds. I dedicated myself to fostering connections with my fellow delegates, and I quickly realized how privileged I was to know all 103 of them. From curating unique social media pages that sparked the interests of our speakers to participating in caucuses for our speaker elections, the 63rd annual class of the United States Senate Youth Program delegates could not have gotten along better. Being in rooms with influential figures that represent our democracy was inspiring, and getting to experience each day with fellow student leaders around the country only fueled my passion to become more involved.

Beyond my friendships with my fellow delegates, I fostered meaningful relationships with our Military Mentors throughout the week. Whether it was a casual conversation over dinner or a serious discussion on career paths, the Military Mentors never failed to offer us every ounce of their attention and made sure that we knew we had someone to count on. These mentors single handedly reminded me of my perpetual duty to serve my country, and their accomplishments and experiences were a testament to the standard of excellence that our country reflects.

Exploring Washington D.C. throughout the week, I found myself in rooms I could have never expected standing in. From offices in the United States Institute of Peace to the seats in front of the Supreme Court, I was in awe of the beauty and deep history of our country's capital. Stepping into the Department of State was perhaps the most revolutionary moment for me as a student interested in international relations. I had always pictured the Department of State and Cabinet members as a distant concept, but as my co-delegate and I found our way to our seats in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room, we were both in awe that we had the privilege of sitting just a few feet in front of Secretary Rubio's podium. At this time, we also were fortunate enough to speak to the new program director, Ms. Wilk, and it was fascinating to hear her aspirations for the program and listen to Secretary Rubio's inspiring speech. The next day was the Senate Reception, one of the most anticipated events, and I felt a smile form on my face as I was greeted by my Senators, Senator Hyde-Smith and Senator Wicker. It was a great honor to speak to my senators for the first time and hear their perspectives from working in Congress over the years; they did not hesitate to ask my co-delegate and I questions about ourselves and offer us Southern hospitality even though we were over a thousand miles away from home. Their encouragement towards our service in our communities fueled my passion to continue working and giving back to my nation, and I felt grateful for their empowering recognition.

By Friday night, I felt as if I was a completely different person. I had joined an amazing community of delegates and Military Mentors, and I had witnessed speeches and toured buildings that left my mind flowing with thoughts. Sitting at our dinner table for our final official meal, I glanced around the Mayflower's beautiful ballroom one last time and tried to memorize the scene. From the laughter filling the room, the aroma of appetizing food, and the excitement in the air, I felt grateful being able to sit in my chair and observe every detail. Amidst this pondering, I felt as if I was back to day one with the same fascination towards my surroundings, but this time, I realized that the answer to my initial question about Washington Week had been laid out before me. I did not have to let Washington Week change my life's trajectory once I returned home because it had already changed my life within seven precious days. Now, I see public service for what it truly is: it is a passion that manifests to serve the nation beyond oneself. I intend to pursue this calling towards public service, and I sincerely thank the Hearst Foundations, my 103 fellow delegates, our program directors, Military Mentors, and distinguished guests for making Washington Week possible and showing me that our nation's greater legacy is a collective pursuit. As Dr. Carla Hayden, the first African American and first woman to serve as Librarian of Congress, put it, "When you are the first, you never want to be the last...create a legacy." I wish that my life only serves to continue the legacy of leadership in my community, and I hope that every citizen can one day have an experience as life changing as the United States Senate Youth Program.