

The Week That Rewrote My Understanding of Service

Reflections from a 2025 United States Senate Youth Program Montana Delegate

As a Montana delegate to the 2025 United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), I arrived in Washington, D.C., with reverence for the institutions we were set to encounter and the program's prestige. But I left with something far more enduring: a deeper, more grounded understanding of what it means to serve and a quiet conviction in the strength of my generation.

We stepped into Washington during a time of extraordinary political tension. The nation felt strained—fractured along ideological, generational, and cultural lines. But I saw something different within the walls of our hotel conference rooms, in the rotundas and chambers where laws are made and debated. I saw what it looks like to lead with curiosity, not combativeness. And I saw a future shaped not by cynicism but by possibility.

Our days were packed with conversations that challenged, inspired, and reshaped us. Meeting Senators Amy Klobuchar and Thom Tillis from opposite sides of the aisle, I was struck by the shared urgency in their voices. Despite their differing ideologies, both emphasized a need to move past performative gridlock and toward authentic collaboration. Senator Klobuchar reminded us that democracy isn't built on agreement but respect. And Senator Tillis, with refreshing candor, spoke about the human cost of hyperpartisanship. It was a sobering reminder that bridging divides isn't optional. It's the only way forward.

Outside the halls of government, the learning didn't stop. At George Washington's estate, we deeply discussed crop rotation—yes, crop rotation. I had no idea how far he was in understanding agricultural sustainability. It was a reminder that innovation doesn't always come from technology; sometimes, it's born from the land itself, from knowing how to work with nature rather than against it.

Throughout the week, I stood alongside 103 of the brightest, most deeply thoughtful students I've ever met. These weren't just academic standouts. They were Tomato Lovers, Op-Ed Publishers, Asian Alliance Members, Hopeful Quants, and genuine, brilliant, kindhearted individuals—each carrying stories shaped by the landscapes and struggles of their hometowns. We became something rare: a room full of young people willing to disagree openly, challenge each other fiercely, and stay up late laughing like we'd known each other for years. And laugh we did.

At one point, while riding past the Jefferson Memorial, a dead serious delegate pointed out the window and exclaimed, "Wait... is that the Lincoln Memorial?" The bus erupted. Our laughter bounced between the seats, echoing through the city like we were releasing a collective breath we hadn't realized we'd been holding.

That wasn't the only moment of delightful chaos. Our campaign for a keynote speaker turned into its miniature version of Iowa. There were caucuses in the hallway and improvised speeches. As the delegates selected Terry Shen and Anjali Verma as our farewell speakers, someone started rambunctiously chanting the slogan "T and A"—both ridiculous and strangely moving. What began as a joke became a full-blown campaign. It hit me somewhere in the middle of that chaos: we weren't simulating democracy. We were living it with all its humor, energy, and imperfection.

Even on the bus rides, the conversations never stopped. One afternoon, I was locked in a heated debate over whether Jayson Tatum belongs in the NBA's top five. I argued that he didn't. Someone from South Dakota was practically shouting. Others jumped in, stats flying back and forth. And in the midst of it, I realized it wasn't about basketball. It was about passion, precision, and persuasion—the tools we'd use in policy, just rebranded in Celtics Green.

Then, there were the late-night conversations in hotel hallways and lobbies. One night, along with two other delegates, I debated the role of "Aura" in the presidential election. We unpacked everything from campaign aesthetics to the subconscious pull of TikTok on the young male mind. It was ridiculous, brilliant, and honest. These weren't sterile debates. They were rich, lived-in dialogues that acknowledged real-world politics' messiness and insisted on hope.

But what moved me most were the Military Mentors. Each had sacrificed birthdays, anniversaries, and entire years of their lives in service to a country we were only beginning to understand from the inside. Many held advanced degrees from institutions I dream of attending. Others had been deployed more times than they could count. What united them was a quiet, steady dignity. Their words didn't carry weight when they spoke; they had wisdom. One mentor in particular stayed with me. He was Indian-American. His presence disrupted a narrative I'd grown up with—that service, especially military service, was not for people who looked like me. But there he stood: confident, composed, deeply principled. In him, I saw something I hadn't yet let myself imagine. My identity and patriotism weren't opposites; they could speak. They could belong together.

In one of the program's early days, I stood before the Constitution at the National Archives and thought about Mike Mansfield—Montana's own and one of the founding forces behind USSYP. He once said, "Today's youth are the trustees of tomorrow." I used to hear that line and think it belonged on a poster or a commencement stage. But now? It feels different. It feels heavier, more urgent, and real.

USSYP didn't just show me the government. It showed me the caffeine-addicted, feminist, brilliant young voices that will inherit it. And for the first time in a long time, I don't just feel hopeful.

I feel responsible.