

Sriya Vangala, NC – 2025

“Courage is fear that has said its prayers.”

My fellow delegates and I heard this quote from the inspiring crew of NASA’s Expedition 71. One month later, I am still in shock from having the incredible opportunity to meet these individuals and hear about their experiences. In reflecting on these moments, I find myself frequently returning to this idea that the astronauts used to talk about their time in outer space: “Courage is fear that has said its prayers.” The idea behind this is that we must be willing to push forward and face our fears even when there is no guarantee of the outcome or the fruits of our labor. We hope for the best and trust that hard work and dedication will help us surpass the obstacles we face. In the week I spent in the heart of our nation, I realized that this quote is why we can’t let fear hold us back from being a part of something larger than ourselves.

There is always some uncertainty that we have when pursuing our aspirations. Whether it is a personal goal or a vision for a future career, the fear of failure seems like an ever-present worry. However, every event of Washington Week showed me the power of being courageous and taking that first step towards achieving your dreams. You never know where a single idea or action can lead you, and allowing fear to hold you back will cause you to lose the opportunity of seeing what *could* happen. Washington Week showed us how one dream, one hobby, or one hope can change the world if we are willing to be courageous enough to try.

Courage is an ideal central to the foundations of public service. In this area, taking a first step could be anything from starting a community initiative to running for elected office. Washington Week provided us with a plethora of insights into these ideas, demonstrating how the courage to work in public service translates in many different ways. Most importantly, Washington Week showed me that courage comes in various forms, and the choice to pursue public service is among one of the most noble causes we can dedicate ourselves to.

This week revealed that courage is not about what we have already, but what we do with what we have. Many of the speakers we met over Washington Week were individuals who left their jobs to pursue their desire to help others at a greater level. They all took that courageous step to use their skills and knowledge for something new, something foreign. Despite the challenges they faced, they continued to strive for their goals and not allow fear or uncertainty to hold them back from making an impact.

Washington Week showed me that courage is not a trait but rather a choice. A choice to keep moving forward to pursue our dreams, no matter what.

Thank you to the United States Senate, the Hearst Foundations, and all of the amazing staff of the United States Senate Youth Program for making this opportunity possible. I am eternally appreciative for all of the hard work and time that was put into creating the unforgettable experience of Washington Week.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow 103 delegates for making this the experience of a lifetime. Not only have I learned so much about perseverance and dedication from each of these incredible individuals, but I’ve also made lifelong friendships and memories that I will hold onto forever. I’m beyond thankful for the opportunity to have met so many talented people, and grateful that they have helped me realize what it means to be a leader: to serve with compassion, commitment, and, above all, courage.