

## Cady Wang, ND – 2025

To say that my life in any way, shape, or form, has remained the same after my time at USSYP would be a disservice to the experiences, lessons, and people in which USSYP so generously bestowed me. As I walked into the Mayflower for the first time, exhausted from an early flight, my expectations for USSYP were through the roof—yet, the experience I truly lived somehow transcended each and every expectation I had set. And as I rolled my suitcase back out through those same Mayflower doors a week later, it wasn't just the weight of suits to become a fashion diva, a flag, scholarship, and a smuggled paper towel from the State Department that I carried with me—it was the weight of inspiration, of new friendships that felt like family, and of a renewed sense of urgency.

Washington Week brought together the most diverse, yet unified group of high-school students I had ever met. Despite an era of American history where divisiveness is all too common, the distinguished delegates and esteemed guests of this program exhibited and brought the pillars of respect, bipartisanship, and humility—the pillars of which all public servants should uphold themselves to—to a whole new level and dimension of depth. Throughout each meal, the conversations buzzed with genuine curiosity and mutual admiration. Over delicious lemon tarts, mouth-watering steak, and underwhelming Capitol Hill-shaped white chocolate (which suspiciously resembled a certain event...), we swapped stories of our hometowns while simultaneously discussing opinions on “hop topics” such as affirmative action and reproductive rights. Yet, as I sat at a new table each meal, surrounded by new delegates and their unique backgrounds, no “gotchas,” no backhanded comments, and no battles to win ever surfaced. The unique stories, circumstances, and words of each and every delegate provided an opportunity to learn and understand—rather than to exploit and blindly blaze on, as we too often see in modern day politics.

Indeed, even the speakers of Washington Week seemed to imbue positivity and genuine belief that I, and the 103 other delegates in the room, could bring about true change. Each speaker carried a different tone, different background, and different perspective. Yet, whether they spoke from a briefing room or the quiet calm of Mount Vernon, the common thread among them all was clear: public service is not a performance, it is a promise. A promise to serve others above oneself, to act ethically even when nobody's watching, and to lead with empathy in a world that often values the opposite. At Mount Vernon, we learned how Washington intended to risk his own comfort and success in the name of progress towards the agricultural direction he believed was right—experimenting, failing, and trying again not for himself, but for the generations to come. And that spirit of selfless innovation echoed in nearly every room we entered. These sentiments, echoed most memorably by Brian Kamoie, showed that hope in the face of uncertainty started by learning. He reminded us that “the same thinking that led us to current problems won't get us out of them,” urging us to think boldly, ethically, and with relentless curiosity. Problems will change. The world will change. And so must we. He asked us to always look for the helpers—and more importantly, to be one ourselves.

Most importantly, I began to see something unexpected in each Q&A session, scripted speech, and impromptu thought: the *humanness* of those who held a grandeur title. We so often see politics as a battlefield of policy—cold, calculated, and distant. But Washington Week peeled back the curtain. Justice Brett Kavanaugh didn't walk in with black robes of unreachable authority; he walked in as a father, a sports fan, a man who told us to “live on the sunrise side of the mountain” while holding his high-school teacher dear to his heart, and reminded us that everyone, no matter how high the office, is just a person doing their job. Michele Exner shared how she, a first-generation, low-income child of immigrants, found her voice in public service not through prestige but through purpose. And every story like that—every laugh, pause, and moment of vulnerability—made it harder to forget that policy is made by people. Flawed, earnest, complicated people.

That was the greatest lesson of all: to never let the weight of politics strip away our empathy. It is dangerously easy to reduce public servants to caricatures, to define leaders solely by their stances rather than their stories. But once we forget their humanity, we also lose sight of our own. The danger of policy is real—yes—but so is the danger of dehumanization.

Over sleepy early mornings and laughter-filled late nights, we didn't argue to win. We listened to understand. And in doing so, we modeled what so many adults have forgotten: that civility is not weakness, and disagreement does not demand disdain. Washington Week gave me a deeper understanding of governance and a deeper belief that people—when given the chance—can still come together with grace, humility, and care.

And now, as I step forward—forever changed, forever inspired—I carry with me every lesson, every voice, and every story from that week. Because in the end, this is my one wild and precious life. And I intend to spend it serving, listening, and *seeing* humanity at the center of it all.