

## **Martin Bergstedt, ND – 2025**

Growing up in a small town in North Dakota, there was one phrase that permeated small town life more than anything else. Whenever any national or global issue was looming in people's minds, these 7 words rang true across the entire town: "I don't know, and I don't care." For my entire life, when it came to politics, government, and current events, I was raised and surrounded by this hands-off attitude. Even when I applied for the Senate Youth Program, this attitude influenced my everyday life. I knew enough about politics to write pretty convincingly about it, but if you really asked me to speak my mind, I'd tell you the honest truth: "I don't know, and I don't care."

When I was selected for the Senate Youth Program, I had no idea what it actually entailed. Truthfully, I viewed it as a bit of a vacation; a free trip to our nation's capital, and more importantly, no homework in sight. It was only when I arrived that I truly understood what I'd gotten myself into. Suddenly, I was surrounded by people my age, who were passionately discussing every issue under the sun. They knew, far more than I knew frankly, but more importantly, they cared.

Now this trip looked less like a vacation, but I couldn't have been happier about it. Before I knew it, I was knee-deep in discussions of the ethics, logistics, and financial situations of issues ranging from each delegates individual hometown to nations around the world. Through the course of the week, I had the opportunity to speak to numerous high-ranking officials, people who had made and continue to make a difference in the world around them, and they inspired me to try to do the same.

But the week was not simply a celebration of our successes. During the week, I recognized my own preconceived biases, discovered topics I knew nothing about, and was outdone and outclassed by the amazing delegates who surrounded me every single day. In that situation, it would be easy to be either disheartened or content. Disheartened, because you feel that no matter what you do, someone will always be better than you, and if that's the case, why even try? Content, because you can feel secure putting the future in the hands of the people around you and stepping away. But instead, Washington Week inspired a positive outlook on the future in me, and hopefully in the delegates around me. By putting in the time I did, I felt confident both in mine and the young people I was so fortunate to meet's ability to make a real difference in a world so full of problems, for two reasons. We know, and we care.