

Alex Seojoon Kim, OK -- 2025

Just write how you feel.

Silently twirling a pen around my fingers, I lean back in my chair as I text a delegate friend about the predicament at hand. Prepared as always, my friend had taken meticulous time to revisit her meaningful moments and simply let the words flow on the page. But for me, all I had so far to show for my weeks of thinking and consideration was a Google Document staring blankly back at my eyes. Unaware to outside viewers though, the document has undergone several drafts of writing, only for them all to be erased, deemed by my standards not fitting enough. The prompt I was given wasn't the issue. Ms. Lynn DeSmet had given our United States Senate Youth class distinct instructions of what our essays should cover with plenty of time to reconvene with our individual selves and as a group. And yet, as the days drifted into weeks, the drafts that I wrote never seemed to fully encapsulate just how special that week became. Writing a reflection shouldn't be that difficult... right?

Looking back, my personal journey involving the Senate Youth program didn't start on March 1st, 2025, the official starting day of Washington Week. Neither did it begin in December, when I was notified that I would have the immense honor of representing the state of Oklahoma alongside my co-delegate. No, my USSYP path began over a year ago, when I applied to the program as a junior. Though I was selected as an alternate that year, I was encouraged by the state Department of Education to reapply as a senior. As I continued to press through my academics and extracurricular activities that year, I came across the Senate Youth class of 2024 beaming in photos, sharing a bond tangibly evident even from a screen. Further inspired by testimonials, I would apply to USSYP again my senior year with cautious optimism. When I was later accepted, I was at a loss of words. Getting accepted to such a position was more than an individual accolade. It was an opportunity to learn from government officials, meet fellow politically energized peers, and explore one of the best cities in the country. I wouldn't know it at the time, but my life had just changed forever.

Following a rather turbulent flight, I was immediately introduced to my fellow delegates and Military Mentors at the airport. Connected beforehand through "two truths and a lie" and mega Instagram group chats, the initial strangeness of observing a real-life person instead of a grainy profile picture soon faded away. That initial phase of awkwardness never arrived. This sense of quick connection and passion would remain a steady presence that only grew stronger as the week went along. Starting from the first day at dinner, I bonded with delegates from other states and got to experience my own "NBA-esque" draft sequence when my name was called in the Mayflower Ballroom, signaling the assignment to my Military Mentor group. From that point forward, I created another close connection with more friends.

Each event that I went to has left an impact on my perception of especially how important bipartisanship and genuine involvement is in political environments. The program schedule intricately intertwined nearly every aspect of what a life in public service could reflect. As a Korean-American immigrant, I could have never imagined walking inside the hallowed walls of the Supreme Court, listening to Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh preach about positivity and self-motivation. As a delegate from Oklahoma, I could have never dreamed of seeing national icons like Senator Cory Booker and Senator Bernie Sanders, let alone meeting my own state's Senator on a one-to-one basis. I got to be in a journalism panel with two other students, asking questions to an NBC White House Correspondent. As an eighteen-year-old kid, I could have never believed that in a 72-hour span, I would visit the Pentagon, hear speeches from the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, and listen to NASA's crew of Expedition 71 right inside headquarters. I was touched by the strength and willingness of Senators Thom Tillis and Amy Klobuchar to speak with our class, who preached to us about how important communicative, multi-faceted approaches are to solving problems across the aisle. I got to spend contemplative moments at both the Korean War Memorial and the Arlington National Cemetery. Simply put, every speaker and learning moment was a chance for our entire class to ask questions, discuss what we had discovered amongst ourselves, and jot down in our blue notebooks lessons that we could take back home.

And yet despite the seriousness of being inside the Senate Building, despite the repeated metal detectors and ID checks, and despite the intensity of the bitter March D.C. weather, what made Washington Week so special were the delegates, Military Mentors, and staff that helped promote an energetic bubble of excitement and fun. While waiting for Senators in the Kennedy Caucus Room, I huddled around with other peers, watching them in awe as they demolished records in “Block Blast.” Being in the superior Coach 1, I remember our entire bus writing a thank you card to Mr. Roger, a lovable legend who repeatedly showcased his driving skills with an impressive array of city parallel parking and weaving an Oklahoman could only imagine. We would have intense mealtime conversations with Military Mentors about several interesting topics, from our tier list of rappers to debating many times about whether Jordan or LeBron was the GOAT of basketball (hint, there’s only one answer in the end). In the span of seven days, our Gen-Z heritage shined through with an Instagram Fashion Divas account and over 1,200 photos shared in our “Photocircle” app. These memories will not only stick with me because of their significance in humor, but because of the wonderful members of society that helped me feel welcome, loved, and appreciated in a time period that felt so short.

Perhaps there’s a reason why I struggled so hard to write this essay. I fear that by writing this essay and sending it off to the internet, a piece of my journey with the United States Senate Youth Program will partially end. By finishing this reflective piece, I understand that I’m committing to what may be an indefinite conclusion to the 63rd USSYP class, and soon enough, the 64th class will experience the same fascinating wonders that I got to cherish. A part of me wishes that I never do have to “officially” move on. But deep down, I clearly know for a fact that I will always be a part of the United States Senate Youth Program family. Now, I’m connected by an emotional bond to 103 delegates, several Military Mentors, the entire Hearst Foundations, and the wonderful city of Washington, D.C. As the great Martin Luther King, Jr. once exclaimed, “In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” I feel at ease knowing that the future of our nation and society as a whole will be spurred on by my outspoken great companions, friends who radiate courage and expression. And I am even more thankful that, as part of the 63rd United States Senate Youth Program class, I have gotten spoiled by a lifetime experience I will never forget.