

Annamika Konkola, OR – 2025

Some moments announce themselves as significant. Others only reveal their weight in hindsight.

Within 58 pages, sandwiched between two navy covers, is a record of my 150 hours in Washington, D.C. Along the front cover, the circular embossment of “United States Senate Youth Program” has been worn down slightly along its bottom left edge, and there is a crease two inches from my notebook’s spine, an indentation from my pen acting as a bookmark as it traveled with me throughout the week. Among my friends, I’m known as a collector of blank notebooks, most of which remain pristine; I still have a diary from first grade wrapped in its original plastic. I’ve tended to hesitate to mark them, not knowing which parts of my life are worth documenting. But this one is full of words, arrows, and quotation marks. Slowly, as the week progressed, its pages were increasingly creased, earmarked, and scribbled-over with urgency I have found in few other moments of my life. Its lines hold everything I hope to remember when I need help deciding to take action or pursue a new direction in the future.

Page 8: “*History is important. Research, judgment of sources, validation of facts, awareness of biases: all essential for democracy.*” This was my paraphrase of Senate Historian Katherine Scott’s message to us, on the afternoon of our third day. From her presentation, I learned that throughout our government’s history, individuals have had incredible power to enact the kind of change they want to see in the world and that the Senate is truly a community, where our representatives are supported by a network of each other and thousands of staff members. Collaboration needs to happen for our system to be successful. On the same page, I have quoted, “*Action is the best antidote for despair.*”

The theme of the week, for me, was potential: our country’s potential to evolve, and the potential in myself and my fellow delegates to shape our future. On page 17 of my notebook, I recorded the moment when Justice Kavanaugh spoke to us about *Brown v. Board of Education* and his reflections on the “courage to overrule precedent.” I scribbled down, “*Being a good judge—and a good candidate for public service—is realizing that decisions have an immediate impact on real people in the real world.*” Ambition is contagious, and being surrounded by new friends who are already impacting their communities in 103 different ways has cemented my hope to contribute to my community through public service. For all of us, my hope is that we remember the significance of our actions and decisions.

Because of Washington Week, my community has expanded to include someone from every U.S. state, Washington D.C., and even beyond the U.S. through DoDEA—103 new perspectives. Page 24: *March 31*. Written in block letters and underlined five times, I wrote myself my first of many reminders of new friends’ birthdays, collected throughout the week as we chatted while seated for dinner and waiting in our bus lines. I hope this will be the first of many times we stay connected.

Already, I have returned to this notebook over the past few weeks. A few days ago, my biology teacher was explaining that if Earth’s 4.6-billion-year history were condensed into a single calendar year, *all* of modern human history would fit into the last few seconds of December 31. By that analogy, my six days and six hours in Washington D.C. are infinitesimal. And yet, somehow, they return to me often—while walking to class, reading the news, staring out car windows on drives home. A paradox I can’t quite explain is how this one week could gift me with so many memories that I will continue returning to throughout my life. Here, I returned to our Senate Historian’s words on the importance of history, and my five pages of awe-struck note-taking at the NASA headquarters about ways public service can include science and innovation.

Another paradox: this week showed me how much I don’t know. It also gave me confidence that I can learn, lead, and listen even when I don’t feel quite ready. And, it reminded me that there are many ways to serve. For example, from sitting with different Military Mentors at every meal, hearing about their lives and career paths humanized a path of public service I’d never considered with such closeness or clarity.

As a result, the biggest challenge in reflecting on my Washington Week experience has been knowing where to begin, and then, how to end. My notebook is now my most treasured souvenir, precisely

because it is not yet finished. I still have over 100 blank pages left to fill. With what? I am still not yet sure, but I now carry a sharper understanding of the responsibility I have to my community. From Washington Week, I am grateful to have witnessed how “*careers are braided rivers*” (notebook page 39—one of my favorite quotes, but one I forgot to attribute to one of our speakers as my pen struggled to keep up with my thoughts) and how it is possible to make a difference while pursuing a diverse range of interests. I hope my experience will help others see themselves as leaders, too.

Thank you to the Hearst Foundations for this gift. Thank you to our program staff, guest speakers, and Military Mentors, especially 1st Lt. Katrina Joiner, whose humor, kindness, and cat pictures grounded our mentor group. Thank you to the Oregon Department of Education for giving me this chance. And thank you to our 63rd class for proving that public service can be joyful, that strangers can become friends in an instant, and that hope, when shared, becomes purpose.

I wish I could remember every moment.