

Katie Jin, OR – 2025

At 5:30 pm on March 1st, our plane finally touched down in Washington, D.C, marking the end of a travel day that had started at 2:30 in the morning from the other side of the country. I was exhausted, low on sleep, and I could feel my legs cramping from the confined space of my airplane seat. However, even a month later, I can vividly recall the sheer excitement that flowed through my body at the site of the city, a stage set for the adventure that was to come. That day, I touched down as a girl who was a culmination of all she had known in Portland. A week later, I left the heart of the nation still as the same girl from Portland, but with a wealth of new knowledge from the 103 delegates, mentors, and leaders I had the privilege of meeting.

Getting to meet my fellow delegates was truly an honor of a lifetime. Not only do I now know someone from every state, but I also had the chance to learn from and engage with some of the brightest minds in the country. Hearing about all of their different lives gave me a new set of perspectives that I otherwise wouldn't have access to. What was more inspiring however, was hearing about all their ideas and passions. Surrounded by students my age, I was inspired by their drive to make a real impact. Some had studied abroad in high school, others had passed local laws, and many had led transformative initiatives—all powered by nothing more than passion and purpose. The friendships that I made during Washington week are ones that I'm sure will stick with me; even after a month with all of us back home in our normal lives, I still find myself constantly texting and calling with my new friends. As I approach the daunting college application season, I find comfort in the fact that I have an amazing group of seniors who are more than willing to support me with their wisdom and personal experiences. As Brian Kamoie perfectly put it, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." I can't imagine a better group of individuals to go together with, and I can't wait to see all the amazing things we all accomplish. It was the honor of a lifetime to share this transformative experience with the 63rd class.

The importance of the relationships formed at this program will forever leave a mark on my character, and the Military Mentors played a big role in leaving this impact. My Military Mentor provided me with new experiences that I never had access to. Growing up as the daughter of two Chinese immigrants who worked in technology, the world of military service was one that I had no exposure to. In fact, I had many preconceived notions about military service and what it said about a person and their intelligence. I have never been more happy to have been proven wrong. My military mentor, Major Jackie Barnum, is the epitome of the values I want to emulate when I am older. Through stories about her own life, Major Barnum taught me to trust your gut when it tells you an opportunity is right for you. She showed me the fulfillment that comes when you live a life true to yourself and your values. These lessons are lessons that I will carry with me, and I am so thankful to have been exposed to another side of public service. Learning from my own military mentor and interacting with the other exemplary Military Mentors in passing was an irreplaceable experience that I will be forever thankful for.

Finally, the speakers that we heard from gave me a perspective into public service that pushed me to think even deeper about our world and how I can leave a lasting impact. Ranging from the Secretary of State Marco Rubio to the Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden, each speaker brought a unique perspective to the stage. For me personally, nothing can top the feeling of walking into the Supreme Court for the first time. I vividly recall a wave of amazement washing over my body as I walked into the grand room with red light ricocheting from the crimson drapes. There was a profound feeling of stepping into a place much bigger than myself, a place where history had been made and will continue to be made. Hearing from Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh challenged me in ways that I didn't expect. While I initially came in largely disagreeing with Justice Kavanaugh and his views, hearing from him pushed me to see past his views and recognize that like myself, he was human. Meetings like this, along with hearing from Senators such as Senator Amy Klobuchar and Senator Thom Tillis, redefined my thinking around bipartisanship. Most importantly, they gave me hope for the future. There's no denying that the country is dangerously polarized, and it can be easy to lose hope in the democracy that had supported us for nearly 3 centuries. Hearing from these individuals, however, reminded me that there were still individuals who exemplified bipartisanship and were working towards the good, not the perfect.

Not only was I given hope for the present, I was also given immense hope for the future. As I looked around on the final night at all the lit flashlights raised in the air, symbols of the promises we were making to ourselves, I have never been more assured that our generation will make this world a better place.

My experiences during Washington Week have inspired me to not only continue my own public service work and journey, but to keep an open mind whenever engaging with others. Since coming back, I have made a promise to myself that even with obstacles surrounding me, I will always strive to leave a positive impact and keep my mind focused on the present, not the past. In the words of Justice Brett Kavanaugh, "Live on the sunrise side of the mountain. See the day that is coming, not the day that has come."

Overall, Washington Week was everything I could have ever imagined and more. The lessons that were imparted on me are ones that I will always cherish. While I am still unsure of what I want to do with my life and what career I want to pursue. However, I know that this experience will forever leave a mark on my one wild and precious life, and for that, I am eternally grateful.