

Elizabeth Shacklett, PA - 2025

"When we believe in the changes we seek, it is easy to commit to doing all we can." As I page through my navy, leather-bound notebook, a relic of my time as a delegate to the U.S. Senate Youth Program, I cannot help but notice this remark by Ambassador George Moose, one that encapsulates the spirit of the 63rd Washington Week. Each page turned in my notebook is a new surge of empowerment. Its lines bear the thought-provoking ideas, insightful perspectives, endearing memories, and life-altering moments that characterized this transformative experience I am so grateful to have been a part of.

Over the course of the seven days my fellow delegates and I spent in the nation's capital, we had the incredible opportunity to meet, hear presentations from, and engage with some of our country's most influential leaders. Senators, cabinet members, diplomats, and even astronauts chronicled their experiences working in government, conveying their triumphs and challenges. They shared their views on the political sphere, provided advice for our future endeavors, and divulged the guiding values with which they navigate their roles. Not only did the U.S. Senate Youth Program allow me to immerse in and better understand our federal government; each speaker challenged me intellectually and distinctly altered my worldview.

In the Mayflower Ballroom, Senator Shaheen emphasized the importance of improving America's education system and ensuring its equity. The Senator's outlook that "education is the one thing nobody can take away from you" reverberated the motivations of my efforts as a literacy advocate. She strengthened my desire to expand my initiative and harness education's potential to dismantle socioeconomic inequality. At the U.S. Institute of Peace, we learned from the work of Ambassador Moose, who articulated that "Conflict is inevitable, but violence is not," a principle we should exercise on the current geopolitical stage. At the Department of State, Secretary Marco Rubio delineated today's global dynamic as the fastest-moving in history, accredited to technological advancements and artificial intelligence, and described public service as a "life calling."

With our hearts beating out of our chests as we strode through the Great Hall of the Supreme Court, a small group of friends and I halted when instructed by Lt. Colonel Hensley. She grabbed our hands, told us to close our eyes, and after a minute of suspense, stepped to the side. "Welcome to the Supreme Court," she whispered, as incredulous smiles drew across our faces and the historic courtroom, with its mahogany bench of preeminent decisions, came into view. Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh described the judges as referees who aim to "call it the same for both teams." Their goal is to undergird individual liberties through consistency and do so separate from the influence of public political pressure, explaining that consistency is how the court must engender respect without chasing popularity. Justice Kavanaugh left us with the ethos, "Strive to live on the sunrise side of the mountain, to see the day that is coming, not the day that has gone."

The unique opportunity to engage with our nation's highest-ranking leaders in person was humanizing—those we often see portrayed through the media are people like us. Listening to these leaders and understanding how they approach their roles invoked a deeper level of respect for them and for the work they do. At the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth stated, "Our nation aims to form a more perfect union in an imperfect world. The U.S. will never be perfect, because humans are not perfect." We learned from him that perfection is not the point; progress is.

One of my most cherished aspects of the Washington Week experience was forming relationships with our Military Mentors who imparted their values to us and embodied the true meaning of service. At Arlington National Cemetery, where my great-grandparents were laid to rest, I had the honor of participating in the wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which instilled the importance of remembering and upholding the legacies of those who served. The selflessness in their sacrifices is an attribute we should all possess, no matter what form our service takes. Secretary Rubio articulated how a desire is embedded within many of us to do something meaningful—something that matters. We crave to contribute to an endeavor larger than ourselves and become compelled to dedicate our lives to a higher calling than personal purpose. While service is undoubtedly challenging and taxing, it is also energizing and invigorating, waking up each day knowing you can effectuate

change that has a real impact on the world. The Secretary said that if we recognize this calling, we should follow it without fear or apprehension. Sergeant Major Black at the Pentagon reiterated, asking us, "If not you, then who?"

Today's political sphere is the most divided in history; polarization is producing narrow-mindedness and adding fuel to the fire of partisan hostility. How can we fulfill the purpose of public service—to better the lives of others—when hatred fractionates us? Bill Doherty of the Braver Angels shared with us that deep curiosity is the most essential attribute to wield in the fields of politics and public service. Mr. Doherty challenged us to ask of those we interact with, "What life experiences have shaped your beliefs?" An emotional and insightful question, it gives us a chance to see each other as people with distinct experiences and worldviews instead of as "others." It allows us to realize why people think the way they do, broaden our perspectives, and establish mutual respect. We can still hold our own while simultaneously understanding other people, and this understanding opens the doors to effective collaboration. Mr. Doherty set the tone for Washington Week—at every speaker's presentation, more hands than could be called on shot up in the air to ask avid questions. The curiosity of our class speaks to the strength of the leadership of the next generation. Public service is rooted in the lived experiences of people, and to succeed in public service, we must first succeed in understanding each other. NASA's Deputy Associate Administrator, Casey Swails, said to us, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."

Our delegate class will undoubtedly go far together. The most treasured part of my Washington Week experience was getting to know and growing close with my fellow delegates. Be it our coach karaoke sessions, deep conversations in the Mayflower Ballroom late at night, storage-depleted digital cameras, or Friday all-nighter, the delegates have left me with memories and friendships I will endear forever. I have never been in a room with as many passionate, driven, intelligent, accomplished, and motivated individuals—learning from them was just as inspirational as the speakers. In his keynote speech during our Closing Ceremonies, Terry Shen told our class, "I hope you continue to meet differently minded but similarly ambitious people." His statement voices the value of the relationships we created with one another—relationships that have not only allowed me to become a better version of myself in the present, but that will allow all of us to better serve others in the future. When describing the delegates of our 63rd class, one word comes to mind: brilliant. Brilliant for their leadership endeavors, the changes they have catalyzed in their communities, their thoughtfulness and insight, and their genuine kindness. Our second Closing Ceremony keynote speaker and my remarkable co-delegate, Anjali Verma, asked our class to turn on our phone flashlights and raise them when her statements resonated with us. As we sat in the Mayflower Ballroom for the final time and Anjali recounted our week together, the ballroom illuminated with 104 brilliant beacons of light. Our delegate class will continue to shine its light in the present and provides us with hope for an even brighter future.

As I conclude paging through my detailed notes, a result of my desire to capture every message, moment, and memory of Washington Week, there is one thing I can discern: my purpose to be a force for good in this world. I am forever indebted to the U.S. Senate Youth Program and to those who made it so special—both have ignited within me a greater passion for public service and have shown me the true meaning of searching for and standing on the sunrise side.