

## **Aaboli Samant, UT – 2025**

I had just gotten selected as one of the delegates from Utah for the United States Senate Youth Program. I didn't know much about the program, or about Washington Week, as I'd only found out about it a couple months before from my counselor. I went onto the USSYP website to see exactly what Washington Week was all about. Going through all the slideshows with photos and videos, I came across one video in which a former delegate said, "Washington Week changed my life." I remember being in disbelief, thinking, "how could just one week change your life?"

But now, almost a month after I myself had the chance to experience Washington Week, I completely understand. Washington Week has changed my life.

We had the opportunity to hear from a variety of speakers, including Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, Librarian of Congress Dr. Carla Hayden, Senator Amy Klobuchar, Ambassador George Moose, Ambassador of Mexico Ana Luisa Fajer and many more. It was so amazing hearing from all of these people, getting to learn a bit about what they do, and asking them questions and interacting with them.

Some of the other speakers we met were Senator Jeanne Shaheen and Senator Thom Tillis. I was inspired by their commitment to bipartisanship, and hearing their thoughts and about their actions gave me hope for the future. In a time when there is so much polarization, it was reassuring to hear from people within the government and have interactions with them in a more personal setting, which also humanizes them more.

A common thread throughout most of the talks were these pieces of advice: pursue your passions, and don't be afraid to take the meandering route. The first piece of advice was put succinctly by Dr. Shawn Domagal-Goldman, the acting Astrophysics Director at NASA: passions are "what boring stuff you do that makes you weird." The second piece of advice particularly resonated with me, as a high school senior who is still unsure about my future. Hearing from all of these successful people, and knowing that they started out equally uncertain about what they wanted to do, and then just "went with the flow" and took whatever opportunities that came their way, all of this inspires and reassures me that even if I don't have my life planned out yet, that's okay—not just okay, it's great, because it allows me to be more open to whatever opportunities are available.

The biggest impact that Washington Week had for me, however, was getting to know my fellow delegates. Over the course of the week, I had some of the most incredible conversations with my peers. I was able to connect so well with many of them. It was amazing to meet people who I could relate to so much, and who could understand me so well. It's the most wonderful feeling when you find even one person who you have similar interests as and can nerd out with and imagine having an entire group of 103 people like that! Some particular conversation highlights for me were having a bilingual conversation in Spanish and French, a conversation nerding out about geopolitics, a conversation about linguistics and how it can highlight social disparities, and many, many more! I had so much to learn as well as share with my fellow delegates and have made many fun memories and (hopefully!) lifelong connections along the way.

It seems crazy to me how this group of 103 other people, who I barely knew at the beginning of the week, became so near and dear to my heart. The last night, after we danced till midnight and hung out into the early morning, collectively pulling an all-nighter, I remember having many caffeine-fueled conversations, trying to maximize the remainder of my time. I couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between our conversations, which had gone from starting with "nice to meet you!" at the beginning of the week, to "it was so nice to get to know you!" at the end. It was bizarre how quickly the week seemed to have gone by, and the fact that I'd gone into the experience with a group of 103 strangers and came out of it with 103 friends. That day was so emotional for me, which I'd never expected, since I'd only known everyone there for a week. I reflected on what an amazing experience it had been, and how I was so grateful to have gotten to know so many of the delegates and made many new friends.

And of course, I can't end this essay without some shoutouts:

To the dinner staff at the Mayflower Hotel and all our other events, thank you so much for your dedication that you put into making and serving our meals—your desserts were fire.

To our Military Mentors, thank you so much for not only taking care of us, but also for all of the insightful conversations over lunch and dinner.

To Jakub and Erin, thank you for being such amazing photographers and capturing all these precious, joyful moments for a lifetime.

To everyone in charge of organizing and hosting Washington Week for us, thank you for putting together an absolutely spectacular itinerary and executing it perfectly.

To the Hearst Foundations, thank you for your generous sponsorship of this program, and for making this whole journey and experience possible for us.

To Rayne, thank you for all your work over the years, and your commitment to this program. I hope you know how much of a difference you've made in the lives of hundreds of delegates.

To my fellow delegates, the most wonderful group of 103 people I know, thank you for inspiring me to work harder and be a good leader, as well as for all of the awesome conversations. I'm truly grateful to have met you guys.

I'm so thankful to have participated in this life-changing experience, which has given me more direction and purpose in my (in the words of Brian Kamoie) "one wild and precious life".