

## Catherine Page, VA – 2025

The moment I stood at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, helping lay the wreath on behalf of the 63<sup>rd</sup> Annual United States Senate Youth Program, I felt the weight of history, sacrifice, and service settle into my core. That solemn, reverent silence echoed louder than any speech we heard that week. It was a reflection of what public service truly means: to serve not for recognition, but because others before you gave everything without asking for any.

Every event that followed held a deeper meaning. I shared daily reflections with my roommate, conversations that started with the day's events but quickly became late-night exchanges about our hometowns, our communities, and our dreams for the future of the country. Despite the fact that every delegate was immensely accomplished, from state board members to student journalists to policy advocates, there was no competition. Instead, there was a kind of mutual admiration, a shared commitment to something bigger than ourselves. We were not trying to outshine each other; we were trying to understand each other.

Visiting the State Department deepened that sense of calling. Listening to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, I felt clarity. Diplomacy is not just about international relations. It is about human relations. Seeing the building where so many of the world's most complex conversations happen reminded me why I am drawn to international affairs. Change often begins with a well-placed question or a moment of empathy across cultures.

One of the most personally empowering moments was hearing from Dr. Jeanette Epps, an aerospace engineer and NASA astronaut. As a girl who grew up pushing for more inclusive STEM education and policy, I was electrified by her presence. She did not just speak about space; she told us, "People don't like me... that's their problem." Hearing that was incredibly affirming. In a world where young women, especially those in male-dominated fields, are often taught to shrink themselves to make others comfortable, her words were a breath of bold, necessary air. What resonated most was her clear message: she did not make it to NASA because she was a woman. She made it because she was the most qualified. Her story was a powerful reminder that excellence does not need qualifiers. She never viewed herself as different from the rest of the astronauts. She viewed herself as prepared, capable, and ready. That moment reaffirmed why I fight for girls in STEM. Not because we need to lower the bar, but because we need to ensure every girl knows she can rise to meet it. Representation does not just inspire. It changes the trajectory of entire generations.

It was the people who made this week unforgettable. Our dinner chats were filled with debates, stories, and laughter that I will carry forever. I met people from places I had never been, whose backgrounds and beliefs were totally different from mine, and yet, we found belonging together. Coming from the DMV, I have grown up in a policy-saturated, ambition-heavy bubble. But Washington Week gave me the "normal bubble check" I did not know I needed, reminding me that the rest of the country has its own rhythm, its own challenges, and its own brilliance.

Throughout the week, the Military Mentors became a grounding presence. Their stories, filled with equal parts discipline, humility, and heart, added a layer of wisdom that cannot be found in textbooks. They modeled leadership without ego and service without conditions. They reminded us that strength and compassion are not opposites. They are partners. Their mentorship pushed me to reflect on how I lead in my own community, not just through my titles or accolades, but in how I show up when no one is looking.

Within the circle of mentorship, Lt. Col. Hensley left an especially lasting mark on my life. All of the Military Mentors showed us what servant leadership looks like, but she led "HenSLAY," as we proudly called ourselves, with warmth and authenticity. Under her guidance, our mentor group became more than a check-in space. It became a home base, a refuge of honesty, laughter, and quiet strength. She challenged us to be bold in our ideas and gentle in our approach, reminding us that the best leaders lead with both courage and compassion. I know without a doubt that her impact on me will endure for years to come, not just as a role model in service, but as someone I feel lucky to know and can turn to as I grow.

And true to what Mr. Kamoie predicted, my roommate Ellie and I still talk every day. Our friendship, and so many others that blossomed during Washington Week, has already outlasted the boundaries of our time together. We showed up as delegates, but we left as family. That is the kind of magic this program creates.

Washington Week did not just elevate my understanding of government. It reaffirmed my passion for public service. It was a space where 104 young leaders came together without barriers, without judgment, and without the pressure to prove ourselves. For one week, we were simply citizens—hopeful, thoughtful, and ready to serve.

A month later, I did not leave with just a list of new contacts or new accomplishments, but with a deeper belief in service as a way of life. From Arlington's quiet reverence to the echoing halls of the State Department, from roommate heart-to-hearts to the mentorship of those in uniform, this week has transformed me. I carry it with me now not just as a memory, but as a mission.