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What defines a week?

Seven days. 168 hours. 10,080 minutes.

But some weeks defy numbers. They stretch time, bending it like gravity around a star—pulling moments into orbit, where they keep circling long after the week is over.

I missed a day of school after staying up until 3 a.m., perfecting my essays. I missed another after staying up until 6, filming and editing my application video—bedazzling a bulletin board that became a constellation of memories. I pinned up photos: me shaking hands with Senator Warren, my friends and I at Girls State, Ophelia and I working late into the night on a fundraiser to send students to Youth in Government. Each pin marked something real, something earned.

I remember the exact moment I found out I was a finalist. I was in AP Calculus, and I jumped out of my seat so fast I hit the desk. I still have the scar. A mark of joy. A small comet trail.

USSYP wasn't just a program. It was a universe.

One morning I found myself in the Russell Senate Office Building—one I knew well. I had served as a Senate Page for Senator Baldwin the fall before, and walking through those halls again felt like returning to a chapter of my life I never wanted to close. But nothing could have prepared me for what happened: Senator Baldwin saw me across the room, smiled, and said my name.

She remembered me. Out of the dozens of students who'd passed through her office, she remembered me. It was the smallest moment—and it made my week.

Later, I stood in the quiet of the Pentagon's reflection room, listening to a story I'll never forget. They told us about Bernard C. Brown, an eleven-year-old boy on American Airlines Flight 77. He was alone, traveling without his family, heading to a National Geographic field trip when the plane hit the Pentagon. That story hollowed something out inside me. We hear numbers when we talk about tragedy. We rarely hear the names. Or that he liked science. That he was just a kid. That he had dreams, and they were cut short.

It was a reminder that policy isn't abstract. That behind every law, every vote, every briefing—there are people. Real people. Sometimes eleven years old, alone on a plane.

USSYP showed me the big picture, but it also brought everything painfully close.

I was at NASA, listening to astronaut Tracy C. Dyson talk about Earth as a fragile infant, wrapped in the thinnest layer of atmosphere. "How could you not believe in a God?" she said. That line hit me hard. Not because it was religious, but because it was real. It was the kind of thing you say when you've floated in space and come back still searching for words to make sense of it.

And somewhere in between all of that—NASA and the Pentagon, the Senate floor and late-night talks—I found my people. 103 other students who cared deeply and thought boldly. People who didn't flinch at big questions. People who reminded me that stars don't compete. They shine in different directions, and together they make something worth looking up to.

So what defines a week?

Not the hours. Not the sleepless nights. Not even the bullet-pointed resume at the end.

A week like USSYP is defined by the moments that stop you cold—the ones that remind you of who you are, what you carry, and what you owe the world.

And if I had to stay up all night again to get here? To lie awake, staring at the sky, finding new constellations in the people around me?

I would. Every. Single. Time.