

Nicholai Galusha, WI – 2025

Before attending the United States Senate Youth Program, I never thought that just one week could be life changing. This outstanding experience quickly proved me wrong. It is difficult to encapsulate in just one essay the magnitude of growth that this program brought to those of us who were fortunate enough to have taken part in it. Reminiscing on the program brings me back to the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel where we viewed the closing speech of our Washington Week. Tears of joy in my eyes, I felt sorrowful that the experience was over, but hopeful for the future, and the ability to apply what I have learned to the remainder of my life.

From the moment I stepped into the Mayflower Hotel, there was a tangible sense that I was part of something far greater than myself. Surrounded by 103 other delegates from across the country, I was immediately immersed in a world of intellect, ambition, and a genuine passion for public service and a drive to change the world. We came from vastly different walks of life, yet we all came together and formed incredibly close bonds over the course of just one week. Many of the individuals I met during Washington Week will be individuals who I hope to keep close to me for the rest of my life.

The speakers who addressed us were equally unforgettable. Going places where no teenagers go, and meeting people that no teenagers meet. Just incredible. Each encounter gave me a deeper appreciation for the complexity and inner workings of our federal government. These weren't just lectures — they were personal, thoughtful experiences that challenged us to think critically and understand a variety of perspectives. It also allowed me to realize that even those at the highest level of government are still just people. They joke around and have stories just like the rest of us.

One of the most powerful moments was hearing from Troy E. Black, the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He said that after being enlisted in the United States military since 1988 and seeing almost every country in the world, he could confidently say that America was the freest and most opportune nation on Earth. It was a call to the fact that I should be incredibly thankful to have the opportunity to live in this great nation and have the freedoms that many before me fought to protect. He had a great call to action that stuck with me, "if you not you, then who?"

As the curtains closed on Washington Week and I stood in that ballroom filled with applause, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. I knew I had been part of something truly rare — not just an educational program, but a call to service. The U.S. Senate Youth Program did more than teach me about the functions of government, it affirmed that young people belong at the table and that our voices, when united by empathy and conviction, can shape a better future. I left with a renewed sense of purpose and a deep responsibility to lead with authenticity and impact wherever life takes me. Now the goal is to someday end up in a position to return to the program as a speaker. Until then!