

Joshua Copley, WV – 2025

At 1:30 in the morning, Washington Week began with a car ride to Charleston, West Virginia. The ride was quiet, mostly filled with my excitement as I shared with my parents that this experience would be something no one in our family had ever experienced in a lifetime. As I was about to board my first-ever plane, I met wonderful people who had lived long lives and were also heading to D.C. They offered to help guide me through the airport, which I was terrified to land at. As the plane took off, I couldn't quite grasp the experience I was about to begin—it was something beyond anything I could dream of. I held that moment close to my heart, as if it were gold, because to my elderly grandparents, I had already seen more than they could ever imagine, coming from a family where we may not have been rich in money but were rich in love and care for one another. The moment began to make me cry because without the hard work of my grandpa's coal miner American Dream and tireless efforts of my grandparents, parents, and other family members, I would have never reached this golden moment. A quote from Michele Exner describes this perfectly: "I owe everything to my family."

Guided through the airport by the kind couple, I reached baggage claim where I gave them a warm hug, thanked them, and then greeted Captain Heaps, the first person I met during the week. As we drove through D.C., I could tell she noticed my awe—I had never seen anything like it. The arrival at the Mayflower Hotel was another experience in itself. I had breakfast with the wonderful staff members, being the first delegate to arrive on arrival day (aside from DODEA, Alaska, and Hawaii, who were all still asleep in their respective rooms). I shared with the staff that I was most excited to hear Dr. Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress, speak. Little did I know that, in two days, my dreams would come true in a way I never expected. The staff members of USSYP were the embodiment of people dedicated to making a difference in the world by investing their time in nurturing the growth of tomorrow's leaders. I was inspired by their caring and wonderful stories, which led them to this program. Their work truly reflected the quote from Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough: "Public service is a noble and heart-filled calling."

Written in my book, followed by a tear stain after reading this quote, "The future Librarian of Congress is from West Virginia," is another quote: "Don't forget that the more mature believes in you"—both from my idol, Dr. Carla Hayden. On that day I got to personally meet the person who has been my inspiration since her appointment. Her quote represents the family that you build during this incredible experience. Military Mentors from all walks of life, each with unique passions, but all driven by the core ideal of protecting this wonderful country, shared their wisdom. There were 17 Military Mentors, ranging from the Space Force to the Navy, all there for one reason—to further the growth of future leaders. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's statement, "The military is the most honorable service anyone could do," encapsulated not just our 17 Military Mentors, but military members around the world. I took time to speak with each Military Mentor, learning about their lives and expressing my gratitude for their service and the impact they make every single day.

Lieutenant Kathryn Rubio gave an emotional yet inspirational speech before we entered the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery, which truly captured the significance of the place: "Their stories are not just part of our past, but a call to our future, which is you. If you take nothing else from today, take this: every stone marks a life that mattered, and we the living have the responsibility to ensure their sacrifice was not in vain." Speaking with my Military Mentor, Captain Justin Bean, was an amazing experience. Each morning, I was inspired by his life, goals, and optimistic, amazing outlook on the world.

"One of you will be standing here one day," said Secretary of State Marco Rubio. His words echoed the dreams of my fellow delegates. My passion leads me to another goal: to become a teacher shaping students who will someday stand at the podium Secretary Rubio spoke from. He also said, "Do not let finances discourage you," and continued to highlight that the rewards of public service far outweigh any financial challenges. This quote fuels my goal to become a teacher in the 21st century—someone who will inspire a student to pursue a life of public service and ignite a spark within their own family to change the world. The mission I received from this program is embodied in a quote from Ambassador George Moose: "To educate and train future peacebuilders worldwide."

“Suddenly among instant friends,” is a quote from Samia Staehle, a member of the Hearst family. From the day I arrived, the connection with my fellow delegates felt as though I had known them my whole life. Their stories of motivation, drive, hard work, success, laughter, and sadness made me confident that each one of them will lead a life of success and unimaginable impact on the world. The kindness and friendship I received from my fellow delegates will forever play a key part in my future success. Among all the speakers throughout the week, I believe the ones who made the most impact on my life were my fellow delegates. Each of them carried their own story, filled with their own trials and tribulations. Yet they rose to not only represent their communities but to embody the key foundations of America—the idea that anyone, no matter who you are or where you come from, can make a change in the world. I believe every individual from the delegate class of 2025 has the ability to change the world for the better. Every person I met was filled with kindness and the love of creating a stronger, better tomorrow. In the future, I’ll be able to look at the official USSYP 2025 yearbook photo and point to every individual, sharing with my future classroom the amazing things they have done for not only the United States but the entire world.

The most emotional speech I heard all week came from Linda Roth of World Central Kitchen. She showed footage of ongoing and past relief sites, one of which was located in Southern West Virginia. At that moment, I began to cry, because just two weeks before this trip, Southern West Virginia had experienced devastating flooding that took lives and destroyed the livelihoods of many. Her quote rang especially true for my home: “When things look the darkest, the best of the world shows up.” I thought about the individuals who took time out of their lives to help others in a community that had been in need following the disaster. Her message echoed the idea that the time to act is “not tomorrow, not next week, but today.” We must strive every day to help others, build each other up, and never forget to serve our communities.

Three quotes stood out to me as the highlights of the week and offer a fitting summary of the experience’s impact and importance. First, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together,” spoken by many speakers, including Secretary of State Marco Rubio, captures the lifelong friendships forged among the 2025 delegates and the incredible coordination between the Military Mentor group and the USSYP staff. Second, from Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh: “Live on the sunrise side of the mountain. The east side sees the day that is coming, not the day behind us.” This quote symbolizes the new beginning every delegate feels upon leaving, promising that good change will come to the world with this fresh start. Finally, a farewell quote by the inspiring program director Rayne Guilford, whose immense contributions to USSYP are matched only by her unwavering belief in the potential of young people and her tireless efforts to change the world—these are the cornerstones of her legacy that continues to impact countless delegates who met her. “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” This question, posed by Rayne Guilford and poet Mary Oliver, produces my answer: I want to strive every day to shape the minds of students around the world, helping them understand that each person can make a difference in their own unique way. I aim to nurture the growth of students into peacemakers and world changers, just as the United States Senate Youth Program has done for me.