

Andy Zhang , AK – 2026

Sitting in the dimmed theater during intermission of *The Nutcracker*, I opened my phone and saw the email: I had been selected as a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). In that moment, excitement came instantly—I would travel to Washington, D.C., meeting national leaders, and engaging with students from across the country. But just as quickly, excitement gave way to doubt. I wondered whether I would belong among delegates whose achievements I imagined would far exceed my own. I worried about what to say, how to act, and whether I would measure up to such a distinguished group. That uncertainty disappeared almost immediately upon arriving in Washington.

From the very first conversations, I realized my assumptions had been wrong. The delegates were accomplished, yes—but more importantly, they were genuine, thoughtful, and open. We talked easily, joked freely, and became friends right away.

One of the most memorable moments of the week came during our visit to the Supreme Court. Sitting beneath the towering red drapes and facing the nine chairs where some of the nation's most consequential decisions are made, I felt the gravity of the institution. We met Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, who shared her journey—from public defender to Supreme Court Justice—in a way that made the law feel deeply human. Her reflections emphasized that judging is not only about legal reasoning, but also about responsibility, perspective, and lived experience. That conversation challenged me to think more carefully about the balance between personal values and impartial decision-making.

Our meeting with my home-state senator, Lisa Murkowski, was equally meaningful. Despite her demanding schedule, she took the time to speak with us candidly about her work and her responsibilities to Alaska. Her openness and dedication reminded me that public service, at its best, is rooted in commitment to people rather than party.

At the same time, Washington Week exposed me to the more complicated realities of public life. In some sessions with elected officials, I noticed how carefully responses were framed. Even outside of televised settings, our more difficult questions were often met with polished, indirect answers. These moments revealed the tension between authenticity and public messaging—an inherent challenge in leadership. Rather than discouraging me, this insight pushed me to think more critically about accountability and the importance of clarity and honesty in public discourse.

Before Washington Week, I expected the highlight to be meeting influential leaders. Instead, the most meaningful moments came in conversations with our mentor, Lieutenant Commander Jordan Spector over breakfast and the late-night talks with fellow delegates. We discussed not only policy, but our communities and personal experiences. Mr. Spector's questions pushed me to slow down, listen, and reconsider my assumptions.

We didn't always agree, but disagreement never felt divisive. Someone from Kentucky could see an issue differently than someone from Minnesota, and instead of creating distance, those differences made the discussion richer. I became more open, more thoughtful, and more willing to change my mind. I came to understand that true public service means engaging across differences and growing through dialogue.

Washington Week showed me that leadership is not about standing above others, but standing with them—listening, learning, and growing together. Looking back, I think about that moment in the theater when I first opened the USSYP acceptance email, unsure if I belonged. What began as uncertainty ended as clarity: I not only belonged, but left with a responsibility to lead with humility, openness, and purpose.