

Kaelci Theuri, AL – 2026

As I scour back through my notes attempting to refresh my memory on the joy that was Washington Week, I notice a gap in my timeline. The morning of March 13th, 2026. It is the only part of the trip I do not have a note of, yet its effect on me is what has had the most permanence.

Although I have been to Arlington National Cemetery before, something about that morning felt different. I remember reflecting on the placement of this visit within our itinerary. The very last day of our trip. Was it so we could be left with a lasting impression of the sacrifice that was made? Maybe, the goal was to end the trip with a moment of honor. Perhaps, all of the above. Truth be told, I *will* remember that morning forever. During the bus ride to the cemetery, I felt plagued with a sense of inequity. *How is it that I am afforded a life filled with such blessings? Why must so many die, suppressing their own desires, to make room for the dreams of others to bloom?* All I could conjecture were the final moments those soldiers felt; how most were filled with incomprehensible courage and fear. It was confirmed at this exact moment that I wanted to dedicate my own life — working in international affairs— to enhance national security.

While this realization was cemented then, it was fostered all throughout my trip.

Earlier that week I had the pleasure of meeting both of my senators: Katie Britt and Tommy Tuberville. I even had the chance to dine with Senator Britt, the Republican Co-Chair for the 2026 program, as she asked my co-delegate and I about our aspirations. There, I was able to see her as not just a Senator but a loving mother, an excellent orator, and most importantly a bold Alabamian. I will forever cherish the privilege to share her appreciation remarks, offering reflections on how to capitalize on the American Dream. The same dream paid for by millions of American soldiers.

Throughout my time, I witnessed the same passion in other leaders. From Senior ABC News political correspondent Rachel Scott, who shared her journey from a college rejection to an interview with the President of the United States, I learned that conviction is the key to confidence and triumph.

In a similar fashion, upon asking Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson “What advice do you have for young women of color attempting to enter the political sphere?” I was enchanted by the power of familiarizing yourself with every room and knowing you belong there.

Passion was everything but lacking in the speakers we encountered, and of course, I would be remiss if I did not speak of the passion I encountered from the other 104 co-delegates who made the trip incredibly special. I have never been surrounded by so many bright minds, all of which were complete with elaborate and unique personalities. Every night I found myself not only enthralled by the outstanding dessert but with a perspective I had never even considered.

Unfortunately, our generation will have to inherit many social, economic, and environmental problems. Still, I can wholeheartedly proclaim—in the words of Senator Ed Markey—, “We may be knocked down, but we will not be knocked out.”

I truly thank God for granting me this opportunity. It has left an indelible mark on me, one that only the future will unravel. The United States Senate Youth Program will remain at the forefront of my mind guiding me in all acts of service.

Thank you, USSYP 2026.