

Kinleigh Freeman, AL – 2026

Imposter syndrome is real. Very real. From the second I met my co-delegate, Kaelci, at the airport, I felt it. This feeling that broke down every self-confident barrier I had built. How did I get here? Why me? Why now?

I first applied for the 2025 United States Senate Youth Program in the fall of my junior year. I made it to the semi-finals, but was not even selected as an alternate for Alabama. I was so upset, as Washington Week seemed like the week of a lifetime. So, for the next year USSYP was this far-fetched idea that stayed in the back of my mind until it was time to apply again. I made it to semi-finals and honestly expected nothing more than that. Then, on the morning of December 4th, I woke up to an email informing me that I had been selected as one of the two Alabama delegates. I was so eager and excited for Washington Week and it seemed so far away at the time. The days moved fast and the months even faster and in the blink of an eye I was packing my bags and that is when the real imposter syndrome began to settle in. I found myself trying to find every piece of information I could about USSYP to help me feel a little more prepared and somewhere along the way I found the answer to my question, why now.

I found a document that said Senator Katie Boyd Britt of Alabama was the Republican Co-Chair of the 2026 United State Senate Youth Program. When I arrived in DC I was informed that as one of the Alabama delegates, I would have the honor of eating dinner with Senator Britt when she came to give her keynote speech. This was my “why now?” If I had been selected in 2025 I would have never had the opportunity to have a sit-down dinner with my Senator and get to discuss with her issues that are close to my heart. I could write a book about the aspects of USSYP that make it so special, but what I believe makes it the most special is the opportunity for conversations with your Senators. I do not know of any other place that gives high school students to have one-on-one time with their Senators. That is one of many things that makes USSYP what it is.

Over the course of seven days, I met 104 other student leaders, who I am certain will all change the world in their own ways. That is something else that makes USSYP so special: the connections. Through conversations over three-course meals at the State Department, bus rides, and even late-night mafia games, I formed deep relationships with like-minded individuals. We all came together from all over the U.S with the common interest of government and a shared passion for public service. My fellow delegates made me feel seen and gave me a sense of belonging that I did not expect to find. This fostered deep conversations between us that were eye-opening for me and have forever shaped my perspective on the world.

All in all, It is hard for me to fully explain the impact that the 2026 United States Senate Youth Program had on me. All I can think to say when people ask me about it is that it was one of the best weeks of my life and I am not quite sure I will ever be over it. Because how is one supposed to get over something that special? Well, you don't. You don't ever get over it, but instead you let it fuel you and shape you into the person you are today. And that is exactly what I plan to do.