

## Manvitha Narasimhan, AR – 2026

Stepping off of my flight to D.C., I had one thought ringing in my head: *this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.*

Attending Washington Week was a longstanding and closely-held dream; I knew there would be no do-over. Afraid of regretting my experience, I entered determined to make the most of every single moment. As the week unfolded in a whirlwind of exclusive tours, four-course meals, and even jokes exchanged with our nation's leaders, I realized that this once-in-a-lifetime experience was more than I'd ever dreamed it could be. I walked away with 104 new friends, several inside jokes, and an enhanced determination to change the world.

Now, a week after my flight home touched down, my bags still sit unpacked in the corner of my room. In the back of my mind, I'm convinced that dealing with them means it's really over, and I'm still not ready for that.

USSYP was my first time in Washington, D.C., and the city felt surreal. Seeing the desk upon which the Treaty of Paris was signed and taking pictures with new friends before the Lincoln Memorial, I was struck by the weight of knowing that generations of aspiring changemakers had once stood in those same spots. Sitting in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room, wandering the halls of our Capitol, and laughing under the skylights of the Department of Agriculture, I could *feel* the gravity of the voices that have shaped our history and future. We got to hear from them directly, too—talking to modern leaders, from Secretary Pete Hegseth to former NASA Administrator Charles Bolden to ABC's Senior Correspondent Rachel Scott, was both a masterclass in public speaking and deeply humanizing for powerhouses I've only ever seen on screen.

However, visiting the Supreme Court was absolutely the highlight of Washington Week. The opportunity to hear from Associate Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, who has been a personal inspiration for quite some time, was unforgettable. She reminded us that “the life of the law is not logic, it's experience,” a sentiment that felt particularly powerful from someone who has had to fight for every room she's ever walked into. This surreal visit was even further enriched by learning how intentional every inch of the building is: the friezes etched into the ceiling of the Supreme Court Chambers representing the historical development of law, the intentional use of American materials for construction, even the custom-built chairs for each Justice to ensure that they sit at the same height. *Everything* carried meaning. It reminded me that the institutions we often take for granted were built with extraordinary deliberateness and balance. I carried this lens with me into every historic building we entered after, learning to spot and interpret the symbolic flower carvings on ceilings and identify older clocks by their Roman numerals.

As incredible as those experiences were, though, Washington Week's magic stemmed from its people. I'd learned about my fellow delegates through social media in the weeks before USSYP, and I worried about finding my place among a group of people who were absolutely exceptional. I'm happy to report that I was completely wrong. The USSYP speaker lineup was extraordinary, but what elevated it was being able to thoroughly dissect every presentation with people who were just as eager to dig deeper, push further, and keep the conversation going. We fought good-naturedly over who would get to ask the next question, secure in the knowledge that whoever won would ask something brilliant. Between the sessions, there were dance parties, endless rounds of Mafia, photo sessions, and more accidental group chat calls than I can count. Somehow, in the span of a week, these delegates became some of my closest friends, and I can't wait to cheer on each and every one as they change the world.

None of this would have been possible without the people working tirelessly behind the scenes. I'd like to extend a huge thank-you to the phenomenal USSYP team, the catering staff, and the Hearst Foundations for all of the work that went into making this week an unforgettable experience. And to our incredible Military Mentors, thank you for giving your valuable time to guide, support, and laugh alongside us. Your unwavering faith in and dedication to our country truly inspired me at every turn, and the genuine pride and care you showed for each of us, a group of strangers you'd only just met, said more about your character than any introduction could.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that I have my fair share of Washington Week regrets. People I should have connected with, questions I should have posed, quotes I should have written down. However, these doubts are eclipsed by the joy I feel every time I look over our seemingly infinite pictures or spy a delegate's success on social media. USSYP didn't just show me the rooms where history is made—it showed me that I belong in them. What I'll carry the most isn't a single conversation or landmark, but the quiet confidence that comes from spending a week surrounded by people who push me to be better just by being in the room. I'm sure that I'll unpack my bags eventually. But for now, I'm holding on just a little longer.