

Luka Nieto, CO – 2026

If passion is a virtue, then the week that I spent in Washington in March may as well have been Shangri-La. Getting the opportunity to spend a while in our nation's capital surrounded by the best and brightest our nation has to offer has been the honor of a lifetime, and has truly opened my eyes to the true scope of the efforts of young people. To many, it can feel like we live in tumultuous times. Despite this, the Senate Youth Program has shown me that we, the youth of our nation, have the devotion, optimism, and perseverance needed to calm the waters of uncertainty and sail our nation steadfastly into the future.

To discuss the impact of this program, I would be remiss to not talk about where it all started: my Military Mentor group. Even though our first night together, going around in a circle and doing icebreakers, was admittedly rather awkward, it became clear after the first day that we were more than just a group of guys at a conference. We were the Avengers; so aptly named because of our mentor, Major "Tony" Starks. The eight of us not only came from different states, but different walks of life entirely. The discussions we had about our lives and our experiences, as well as the issues affecting all of our homes, were some of the most impactful and meaningful conversations we had, and ones I won't soon forget. Each of us had something special we brought to the group, like Anthony's conservation work, Rahman and Harrison's experiences in the medical field, or Omy's work in teen advocacy. Ultimately, over the course of the week, we truly became more than the sum of our parts.

These lessons of unity manifested in the speakers, too. It seems as though, in the past few months, it's become impossible not to think about space. Between the release of the movie "Project Hail Mary" and the Artemis II launch, the borders of our minds have expanded beyond the furthest reaches of the atmosphere and into a world where the realization of our shared condition here on Earth has only become more apparent. For these reasons, I and many of my peers will tell you that Major General Charles Bolden stood out among the illustrious group of individuals that gave us their time. Sitting in the National Air and Space Museum, directly under the Bell X-1, hearing from the former administrator of NASA was an experience as crazy to me now as it was then. General Bolden, because of the Senate Youth Program, has become one of my personal role models. He wasn't afraid to be vulnerable, interacted with us afterwards, and spoke with such a calming yet confident demeanor very few can achieve. Surprisingly, however, his most fascinating words weren't the ones regarding rockets and spacecraft; rather, they were the ones speaking about what it means to be human on a planet that sometimes seems so fated for conflict. I won't soon forget his story about his time in space with Russian Cosmonauts, and how he went from detesting working with them to becoming best friends. They, in the vacuum of space, looked upon the Earth without borders and likewise did the same to each other. It's up to us to continue this sentiment and work towards a world united by understanding, not divided by disdain.

Another one of the standouts, to me, was Mr. Mark Shriver. At first, I was ecstatic that I was now two degrees of separation away from Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sargent Shriver, and three away from President JFK. But, after the excitement settled, I started listening to what he had to say. His work with Save the Children is truly inspirational, as it goes to show that advocacy isn't all what you see on TV. There are people working outside public offices to further the public good. His presence at the program was exceptionally meaningful to me.

Perhaps the most relevant as it pertains to my personal future was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dan Caine. In June, I will begin my journey at the United States Air Force Academy and start off on a long road of dedicated service to my nation. So, when I heard that we would be hearing from the Chairman, I listened with the utmost intent. Every day, we look at the news and see a story about the happenings in the world, and politics always play a factor. For that reason, hearing General Caine talk about the military from an entirely apolitical standpoint was incredibly refreshing. His more than thirty years of experience in the military shined through in every word he spoke, and it was clear that a life of experience had followed him through the door and to the podium. When he forgot to write down one of the New Mexico delegates' names, he remarked "I'm a crummy leader, but I'll be better tomorrow." This really stuck with me. Leadership is not a skill that develops on its own. It takes work, dedication, and deliberate effort to refine. Servant leadership lives on in our nation.

If I wasn't limited to two pages, I could write a book about my time at Washington Week. Thanks to Senate Youth, I now have an even wider network of friends from all over the nation who are committed to service beyond themselves in every regard. Every day, when I look at the group portrait on my wall, I can rest assured that the future of our country is in good hands. General Bolden left us with this, and I will now leave it with you: "we will be okay because we will make it okay." I have nothing left to say except thank you, Senate Youth.