

Amira Dhople, GA – 2026

“They’d never pick me.” When Charles Bolden, Jr. recalled to us what he responded with when asked why he would not apply to become an astronaut, I understood him completely. In fact, the same words had run through my mind six months prior as I debated whether or not to apply to the US Senate Youth Program. “I’ve realized you don’t know what will happen though,” he continued. After Washington Week, I could not agree more. Six months ago, I didn’t realize that I would be selected as one of the two Georgia delegates, hear from some of my biggest inspirations, and make 104 new best friends who shared my passion for government. Most importantly, I never expected to walk away with so many lessons learned, whether it was from speakers, Military Mentors, or my fellow delegates. As I reflect on Washington Week, what stands out most to me is the conversations from throughout the week.

The most significant conversation I engaged in occurred on the third night of the program. What started as a simple dinner conversation of sharing our names and where we are from (the classic USSYP introduction), soon turned into an in-depth analysis of politics and policymaking. At first, this conversation felt scary; I wasn’t able to share these thoughts and ideas back home. Leading into this night, I had heard speakers and Military Mentors share how USSYP was where you could have conversations like nowhere else. That night, I truly understood what they meant. As we discussed various topics, I heard perspectives from delegates from states far away from mine, such as California, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Washington. No where else can I hear from such a wide range of perspectives from a diverse group of people across the United States. And we didn’t just discuss our personal beliefs or criticize what was going on: fueled by our shared passion for our government, we began to collectively create solutions to our nation’s problems. I also learned greatly from this group. After hearing an address from a Senator, ideas from different points of view emerged. The delegate from Washington who aspires to become a journalist analyzed the Senator’s body language, introducing me to a new analysis of her responses to our questions. The Massachusetts delegate who had paged with that Senator shared his insights of her speech, contributing what he knew of her from his previous interactions working with her. Shaped by these diverse perspectives and experiences, I gained a deeper understanding of the Senator’s message and what influences our government leaders.

My understanding of public service leaders and careers was further shaped at the State Department, where I sat with members of the Office of Foreign Affairs, Humanitarian Assistance, and Religious Freedom. As someone who aspires to pursue international trade with a focus on assisting developing countries, the personal conversations I was able to have over lunch were a notable part of my experience at USSYP. Their insights not only expanded my scope on the impact of public service, but solidified my desire to pursue a career in this field. I gained a deeper insight into how the US engages with foreign public in order to shape their opinions and openness to our foreign policies, along with a newfound comprehension as to what methods I can use to further contribute to that.

I am especially grateful that USSYP provided us the opportunity to ask the most influential leaders questions. Rachel Scott stressed that, “Time is much better spent asking the tough questions rather than asking why you are in the room,” and I am confident we made her proud with the questions we asked along the way. As I have transitioned back home, I have found that the lessons I learned from the answers to our tough questions have been most valuable in sharing information about our democracy and government decisions to my peers, teachers, and community members. For example, when my classmates were curious about how decisions relative to the current war in Iran were being made, I could share what I learned directly from Pete Hegseth’s responses to our questions on that subject.

A common theme in all of these impactful conversations has been the people. Each moment of my time at USSYP was shaped by the delegates around me. Playing word games at the

Pentagon, making jokes on the long bus ride to Mount Vernon, and pulling the annual all-nighter on the last night of the program are just a few of the memories I will always treasure.

“Democracy is not a spectator sport.” When Charles Bolden Jr. stated this to us, I thought there could not be a more contradicting statement to what I have grown up with. Before Washington Week, I felt isolated by my passion. However, my amazing 104 delegates reciprocated this passion and inspired me with each story they shared.

“You don’t know what will happen though.” Going into Washington Week, I didn’t know the travel issues we would encounter on the first day, that the word “bipartisanship” would become such a strong inside joke that saying it could make a delegate laugh out loud even in the most silent rooms, or how impactful the other delegates and Military Mentors would be on my life. While it is true that I don’t know what will happen in the future, I know one thing for certain: the delegates of the 64th annual U.S. Senate Youth Program will go on to lead our nation with collaboration, dedication, compassion, and, of course our favorite, bipartisanship.