

Lotus Yasuda, HI – 2026

Most people like to quote Ralph Waldo Emerson's "It's not the destination; it's the journey." For the 2026 United States Senate Youth Program, I would say it is both. From flight delays and cancellations to my first steps into the Mayflower Hotel, my heart raced with many emotions: excitement, anxiety, fear, and curiosity. However, as the days went by, my excitement to learn, form new friendships, and teach others about Hawai'i dominated my anxious and fearful feelings. Upon my arrival home, I sadly unpacked my personal belongings and pulled out my Senate Youth blue journal. Flipping through my daily entries, I was reminded of my shared life-changing experience with 104 of my fellow delegates.

March 6, 2026: Travel Gone Wrong. Picking up spam musubis from the 7-Eleven near my house, I was excited to meet my co-delegate, Anna, for the first time. When I got to the airport, we started eating the musubis and talking about everything we were looking forward to: the people, the new places, the speakers, the food, and everything else in between. Then, our flight got delayed. Delay after delay, we began to panic, but enjoyed the chaos of our journey to Washington Week. After a cancellation and many delays, we finally made it onto our flight. Today's lesson: Patience.

March 7, 2026: Military Group of Gals. Instead of arriving at 7 AM, we arrived at the Mayflower Hotel at 7 PM, meeting one other delegate along the way, Hayley. With 15 minutes to eat, we rushed to pack our plates and find a table to sit on. Exhausted yet thrilled, we eagerly anticipated our names to be called for our military groups. Little did I know that I was sitting at the same table as my Military Mentor, Captain Leara Shumate. For the next 6 days, Anna, Ava, Juliann, Lola, Nyla, Shivani, and Captain Shumate would slowly become my new 'ohana (family). Today's lesson: Connection.

March 8, 2026: Be Curious. Visiting George Washington's Mount Vernon and the Smithsonian American Art Museum allowed me to experience educational content beyond the classroom. *What kind of individual was George Washington outside of my textbooks? How was his leadership? How has history influenced American art?* All of these questions and more have been answered through the experience of being there, walking through the various rooms, and absorbing as much information as I could. Today's lesson: History.

March 9, 2026: "You Belong Here." This phrase, emphasized by Mr. Brian Kamoie, changed my perspective on my USSYP experience. From the time I heard about this program from my older brother, Maverick (USSYP 2023), to Ms. Wendy Wilk's first speech, I learned and felt imposter syndrome. Sitting in a room with very accomplished and outstanding peers, there were moments when I felt like I had no place being here. However, Mr. Kamoie brought me back to reality with the reminder that I, in fact, did belong, and so did each of my peers who were feeling the same way. While simple, this phrase allowed me to forget these feelings of inferiority and discomfort. Instead, I could focus on my goal of growing through gaining new knowledge and experiences with my eclectic peers and making friends along the way. Today's lesson: Sense of Belonging.

March 10, 2026: "You are No Better than Anyone Else and Not Worse Either." Mr. Charles Bolden's words remind me that everyone is equal, regardless of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, and religion; we are all human beings on planet Earth. Even at the back of the museum, I could feel his love for space, collaboration, and the youth as he spoke. Through his speech and life advice, I realized that despite differences and conflicts between countries, we can continue to befriend and work with others to create a positive impact on the world. Today's lesson: Collaboration.

March 11, 2026: "The Stories We Tell Ourselves Matter." Ms. Rachel Scott's words highly resonated with me. Coming from a disadvantaged background and facing many adversities, Ms. Scott had many opportunities to take the easy path in life. However, she chose to persevere through these difficult times. Along the way, one of the most important phrases she shared with us was that of the importance of the "stories we tell ourselves." On this same day, Major Daniel Sprouse shared the story of his Purple Heart with Coach 2. In battle, he demonstrated resilience, determination, and love for his troops and family. His message to us was simple: smile every day and be kind. Today's lesson: Grit.

March 12, 2026: Appreciate Every Moment. With 105 of us, delegates, lined up, I was number 103 in the back. Along with me were Andy (105), Faith (104), Ella (102), Katherine (101), and Lucas (100): The Desserts. Standing outside the White House, we were hit with intense winds and rain; the temperature felt as if it had dramatically dropped. However, rather than complain about the harsh weather, we found a way to bring light to the stormy day and create warmth among ourselves, too. By singing, dancing, and laughing, we emanated happiness in a time that seemed stressful and challenging. Today's lesson: Joy.

March 13, 2026: Remember. Walking through the Pentagon, it felt surreal. Seeing the names of those who were killed during or following September 11, 2001, made my eyes water. Our tour guide encouraged us to memorize the name of a victim who passed away to keep their memory alive. I will remember Bernard C. Brown II, whose life was ended before it truly began. Today's lesson: Sympathy.

March 14, 2026: A Hui Hou (Until We Meet Again). I was always told that this experience would be life-changing. However, I never knew what that would entail. After a week of intensive learning and growing, exhaustion lingered in every room. Despite this, new friends waited downstairs from 3 AM to say goodbye to one another. In Hawai'i, we like to say "a hui hou" as parting words, signifying that our time will come when we can reunite. While Washington Week has concluded, the relationships built will be treasured for a lifetime. It is not simply the journey or destinations that matter; it is both. My final lesson: 'ohana (family).