

## Lola Barron, ID – 2026

Unknowingly, going to Washington Week meant finding the world for me.

Coming from a rural and isolated town in Northern Idaho, I knew my week in Washington, D.C. would be amazing; however, I did not realize how much it would completely change my outlook on my future, my aspirations, and all the people in our world.

Meeting people from across the nation was only the surface of what was to come. Seeing the different backgrounds, futures, and everything in between opened my eyes to just how beautiful our world is. It taught me that the phrase “the possibilities are endless” is so true when we actually open our eyes and ears to each other.

To say that the students at USSYP changed my life would be an understatement. My fellow delegates had so much passion, ambition, and love to show the world; they are now my biggest motivators. They taught me the worth of a single smile and just how much we can learn about ourselves by asking others to share their story. I remember vividly thinking that if I could stay with my fellow 103 delegates through college and beyond, I would. Saying “goodbye” to my new life-long friends felt more like saying “see you soon” because we knew that with the connections we made, we would see each other again.

I remember worrying during our final days about how my reintegration with my hometown would go. My worldview had changed and with it had my view of the people in my city and state. I remember telling one of the Military Mentors, “The people back home just won’t get it” and I remember her expressing to me “That’s why we are here. You have to *make* them get it.” This was one of the most impactful conversations during Washington Week for me because it reinforced my reason to be there and put in perspective what the program meant for our nation—that we are the ones who will lead next and that only through our collaboration and service will the nation continue to prosper.

The week would not have been the same without the amazing military mentors. They were the wisest and most thoughtful people I have ever met. My military mentor was Captain Leara Shumate—and she changed my life in ways that words can barely capture. She showed us the power of strength when it is accompanied by trust, kindness, and some light-hearted jokes. I am endlessly grateful that I had the honor of meeting such an amazing leader in my life, and I know my week would not have been the same without her.

One night, at dinner with a different Military Mentor, my table was asked what motivates us to live, love, and serve. I had not ever been posed with this question, but upon a little bit of thinking I decided that it all went back to an amazing mentor I had years ago who led me through a dark time in my life. I expressed to the table that I wanted to be like her and help people during their darkest moments, and that’s why I am going into healthcare.

Above all, Washington Week taught me that there is no one absolute way to success, but that if we come together there is a guaranteed future of success. As the final night was wrapping up at USSYP, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the program and for my many newfound friends. This program opened me to the world and showed me a glimpse of the bright future that is already beginning for the United States through the service, compassion, and love of delegates at the United States Senate Youth Program.