

Patrick Graboviy, KY – 2026

I arrived in Washington, D.C., with a textbook understanding of American government, but I departed with a profound, lived appreciation for its complexity. Washington Week was not merely a series of high-level meetings; it was an immersion into the heart of our democracy. From the moment I met my fellow delegates, it became clear that the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) is designed to do more than educate - it is designed to inspire and bring together the next generation of public servants.

One of the most impactful aspects of the program was the opportunity to engage directly with the architects of our current political landscape. Charles Bolden particularly resonated with me. During their presentation on their experience as a NASA administrator and astronaut, I was struck by their emphasis on working with people that were taught to hate you. This moment shifted my perspective on working with people that see us in a negative perspective, illustrating that leadership often requires the courage to listen as much as the drive to lead.

Similarly, the visit to the State Department and Senate offered a tangible connection to the pillars of our republic. Standing in a space where history is actively made gave me a sense of the "long view" of American progress. I realized that the institutions we often view as static are actually dynamic, shaped by the dedication of individuals who view public service as a calling rather than a career.

While the speakers provided the framework for the week, my fellow delegates provided the substance. My peers brought a rich variety of viewpoints to every dinner conversation and bus ride. I valued our discussions on every single topic possible because (aside from finally being able to speak with highly educated citizens) they forced me to articulate my own values while respecting the lived experiences of others and then trying to re-evaluate my own perspective.

I was especially moved by the Military Mentors and their commitment to mentoring us and guiding us throughout the entire week. Their commitment to "service above self" served as a constant reminder of the discipline required to maintain a functioning democracy. The bond formed with my small group was a highlight of the week, proving that common ground is always reachable through genuine engagement.

The overall impact of Washington Week has been transformative. Before this program, my interest in government was theoretical; now, it is personal. I am returning to my home state of Kentucky with a renewed sense of responsibility.

The experience has solidified my desire to pursue a career in business and finding a connection to service and the United States government. More importantly, it has equipped me with the realization that leadership is not about the title one holds, but the impact one has on their community. I am deeply grateful to the Hearst Foundations and the United States Senate for this unparalleled opportunity to see the heart of our nation and to find my own place within its future.