

WanTing Hou, ME – 2026

Walking into the airport for my flight to Washington, D.C., I could not tell whether excitement or nervousness had taken over. It was the two friends I met on the way, fellow delegates also heading to the United States Senate Youth Program, who shifted that feeling. As we played LinkedIn games and talked about the week ahead, I realized excitement was starting to outweigh my nerves.

When I arrived at Reagan National Airport, I was greeted by Military Mentors and fellow delegates. I remember pacing back and forth around baggage claim with others as we waited, talking about our different travel experiences and how we all got there. On the bus ride to the Mayflower Hotel, I started to feel imposter syndrome set in. Being surrounded by so many high-achieving people made it hard to open up at first, and I kept wondering if I truly belonged there.

Conversations with delegates and alumni, and especially the session led by Dr. Bill Doherty, helped me open up. I realized that, beyond everything we had accomplished, we were just normal teenagers. We laughed about random things, shared stories about where we came from, and started to feel more at ease. Hearing from people from states I had never been to made the experience feel fascinating and strangely real at the same time.

One of the parts I'll always remember was connecting with my Military Mentor group. When I first met Captain Alexandria Rossi and the rest of the group, I wasn't sure what to expect. But through small activities like making friendship bracelets, creating a group name and handshake, and catching up each morning at breakfast, we formed deep and meaningful connections with one another.

Listening to speakers from different areas of government was both inspiring and eye-opening. Hearing from people working behind the scenes, especially in nonpartisan roles like generals and Senate officials, showed me how much work goes into making government actually run. Out of all the speakers, former NASA Administrator Charles Bolden stood out the most. He was authentic, and the way he spoke about his life made me think about how I want to approach my own challenges and future. Sitting in the Air and Space Museum and hearing him reflect on his journey is a memory I will always carry.

Some of the moments that stayed with me were deeply personal. Talking to a Foreign Service Officer at the Department of State gave me insight into a career I hope to pursue. Meeting Ambassador Suriya Chindawongse of Thailand and getting to introduce myself and chat with him afterward made the experience even more meaningful. I also had the chance to speak with my Senators, share my experiences, and hear their advice. Those conversations felt like once-in-a-lifetime opportunities I'll never forget.

Honestly, some of my favorite moments were the simplest: bus rides full of laughter, late-night conversations, and endless rounds of Imposter, where I never win. On the last night, staying up late saying goodbye to friends as they flew back to different parts of the country, I felt the weight of how unforgettable the week had been. Washington Week can't last forever, but the experiences, the friends, and the mentors I met along the way will stay with me for the rest of my life. I learned so much about listening, learning, and connecting with others, and more than anything, I realized that I belong in spaces like this. I saw the brilliance and capability of my generation, and most importantly, the drive and willingness we have to step up, take initiative, and be at the heart of change.