

## **Charlisa Penzak, MI – 2026**

Before Washington Week, several alumni told me that USSYP would be one of the best weeks of my life. Even with such glowing praise, no words could have accurately captured the sense of community, hope, and inspiration that defined the actual experience. I can say without reservation that Washington Week has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life, and I will carry the insights I gained with me for years to come.

Leading up to Washington Week, I connected with fellow delegates online through a massive Instagram group chat and introduction posts. I remember overthinking my “Two Truths and a Lie,” stressing about how I would come across. After meeting other delegates in person, however, I quickly realized I had nothing to worry about - everyone was incredibly accomplished, yet humble and friendly. As much as I valued hearing from distinguished speakers, I equally cherished the connections I formed with my fellow delegates - many of whom I am confident will become future Senators, Governors, or even Presidents. Whether it was through late nights playing Mafia, vlogging USSYP’s famous desserts, singing karaoke, or simply talking about politics and life, we all became a family. I formed lasting bonds with many delegates, my Military Mentor group (shout-out Lt. Carl’meisha Carabello & the Queen Bees!), and my wonderful roommate, Lakshmi.

That spirit of connection extended into the program itself. Bill Doherty, Co-Founder of Braver Angels, was one of the first speakers we heard, and his emphasis on bridging the partisan divide by listening with an open mind reflected the values of our cohort. One of my favorite aspects of USSYP was its ability to bring together delegates from diverse geographic, socioeconomic, ethnic, and political backgrounds. Despite these differences, we all found common ground and engaged in respectful political discussions. Hearing from the diverse array of perspectives broadened my understanding of different political viewpoints and ways of life.

Throughout the week, the program speakers were consistently inspiring, engaging, and thought-provoking - I can only imagine the dedication and herculean effort on the part of Senate Youth organizers to bring us such an amazing experience. On the first day, we had the privilege of hearing from Justice Jackson and Senator Britt, both of whom spoke with extraordinary eloquence and captivated us with their stories. Other speakers brought a unique understanding from what it means to be a high schooler in the Senate Youth program or navigating the college application process. Mr. Kamoie, for instance, offered reassurance to each of us, reminding us that we belonged in the program and helping ease the imposter syndrome many of us felt. His question, “What will you do with your one wild and precious life?” challenged us to make the most of our limited time – both in the program, and in our lives. His speech served as a powerful reminder not to let self-doubt limit our potential. Rachel Scott built on this message when she shared her story of overcoming college rejection, emphasizing that success is rarely linear and that we should never question “our right to be in the room.”

Meeting my Senator, Elissa Slotkin, was another unforgettable highlight. Having only previously known her from advertisements and news articles, I was struck by her generosity in taking time to speak with my co-delegate and me. She shared her experiences, offered thoughtful guidance, and provided insight into the realities of legislative work. Additionally, hearing from Secretary Pete Hegseth and Chairman Caine reinforced my interest in geopolitics. I still can’t believe that I had the chance to learn about defense policy from senior national security leaders themselves.

However, undoubtedly the best part of my week occurred on the evening of my 18th birthday, when I had the honor of introducing H.E. Suriya Chindawongse, Royal Ambassador of Thailand to the United States. As a Thai-American dual citizen, meeting him meant the world to me. At the beginning of his speech, he led the entire program in singing “Happy Birthday” to me - a thoughtful gesture that remains one of my fondest memories of the week. His remarks also reinforced the importance of studying foreign policy and the value of international cooperation. Dining with him, hearing his stories, and receiving his advice on diplomacy and life was an unforgettable experience. A quote that particularly resonated with me was his reminder that we should “always reach for the stars, but keep our feet on the ground.” This reflects the balance required in public service: the need to think ambitiously and aspire for meaningful change, while remaining grounded in reality.

Before USSYP, I had never visited Washington, D.C.’s historic landmarks, and experiencing them gave me a deeper connection to America and its history. More importantly, the program fostered a rare sense of community in a time when politics is increasingly divided. I am deeply grateful to the Hearst Foundations for making this experience possible and for investing in the next generation of public servants.

So, I’ll end this essay the way my Senate Youth experience began – with two truths and a lie:

1. I gained a clearer sense of purpose in pursuing a future in public service.
2. I made lifelong friends and connections during Washington week.
3. USSYP has NOT changed my life.