

## **Feven Tesfaye, MN – 2026**

As I counted down the months, the days, the hours, and even the seconds leading up to “Washington Week,” I was filled with anticipation. I imagined the experience would transform my life through the speeches of government leaders, politicians, and journalists. I spent time researching past speakers and their areas of expertise to prepare for everything I would encounter. But there was one part of the experience I couldn’t fully understand from research alone: “military mentors.”

From the moment I first read those two words, I found myself wondering what these military mentors would be like. I stereotypically pictured intimidating figures, stern, distant, maybe even unapproachable, and as my departure for D.C. grew closer, that uncertainty and slight fear lingered in the back of my mind. However, that uncertainty disappeared almost instantly when I met my first mentor, Captain McCowan.

I was struck not by intimidation when I first met her, but by connection. As she shared her story, where she grew up, where she went to college, just two hours from my own home, and in that moment, she stopped being an abstract stereotype, and symbol but an actual person with experiences, challenges, and aspirations that I could understand.

Throughout the week, I had the opportunity to learn from over a dozen military mentors’ stories. My personal mentor, Lieutenant Nicole Davis, stood out in ways I didn’t expect. Her warmth, her humor, and the way she called my fellow delegates and me “girly pops” created a sense of comfort that quickly replaced my unease with joy. Through conversations both formal and informal, I began to see military service not as something distant or rigid, but as something deeply human. As for much of my life, I struggled to connect with the idea of patriotism the way others seemed to. I never felt the emotional pull that led some people to tears during the national anthem or inspired dreams of serving through war. But during Washington Week, something shifted. Through every conversation after a speaker and every story shared by these mentors, I began to understand patriotism in a new way, not as blind pride but as a commitment to people, to service, and to community.

Now, as I reflect on that countdown, the months, the days, the seconds, I realize I was preparing for the wrong kind of transformation. I expected polished speeches and powerful leaders to shape my experience. Instead, it was the quiet, personal stories, the ones I couldn’t research or predict, that changed me the most, and I thank Washington Week for that and for teaching me that the most meaningful transformations come not from what we expect to hear, but from the human stories we never saw coming.