

Nial Chen, MS – 2026

Delegates, you are the best of the best.

Throughout Washington Week, numerous speakers and Military Mentors carved this into my brain. When I discovered mid ceramics class I would be representing Mississippi in the United States Senate Youth Program, I was elated. For a moment, I thought I was the best there was. Yet, as I landed at the Washington National Airport, I began questioning myself.

Was I really the best of the best?

Am I really going to be a “leader of the future”?

Listening to what felt like every delegate discussing their nonprofit with impact across several countries or perfect SAT scores made me feel like an imposter; I constantly asked myself if I really did belong in the room. In Washington, D.C., I was just a kid from Mississippi.

Walking into the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower Hotel on Monday, I did not know what to expect from our first keynote speaker, Brian Kamoie. As he pushed us to question what we will do with our “one wild and precious life” and encouraged us to commit to a career in service, what stuck out to me most was what he said in the beginning: *YOU belong here*. He explained that he opened with that because as a former delegate, he, too, felt like an imposter. For the first time that week, I stopped comparing myself to everyone else in the room. If someone who once stood where I stood could go on and lead and serve at the highest levels, then maybe I wasn’t an imposter.

“How can we address the increased rates of young men tuning out of society?”

My fellow delegate’s question to Mark Shriver, the President of Don Bosco Cristo Rey High School, sparked a deep conversation I never imagined having on the back of a bus.

As we prepared to board our coaches to the White House that morning, my Military Mentor, Major Daniel Sprouse, stopped us. He told us that all the boys would gather in the back of the bus for a conversation. Alongside Captain Blake Bohlman, they led a discussion on the growing loneliness epidemic among young men. On that bus ride, we talked about the lack of role models, the importance of building genuine connections, and the stigma that often prevents young men from opening up. What struck me most was how quickly the conversation became honest. People who had only met days before were willing to speak openly about something so personal. While unexpected, the conversation was very much real and needed.

It wasn’t just Major Sprouse and Captain Bohlman. Throughout the week, the Military Mentors were truly incredible. They offered constant support, were easy to talk to, and encouraged us to reach out to them even beyond Washington Week. Before the program, my perception of the military was limited, and I did not fully understand the depth of service it required. However, I was immediately struck by each mentor’s accomplishments and humility. Listening to their experiences and commitment to serving something greater than themselves instilled in me a deep sense of respect and patriotism. More than that, it challenged me to consider how I might serve others in the future—whether through the military or in another path of leadership.

“Hey, could you help me with my speech?”

I must have asked this question a dozen times to any delegate who happened to cross my path that Wednesday. I was running to give the Farewell Night Speech and spent the whole day frantically drafting, but I was inexperienced—I’ve never participated in public speaking before and my school never offered speech and debate or anything of that sort. That evening, when it was my turn to speak, I was so nervous I tripped as I stepped onto the stage. Before I began my speech, I admitted my inexperience with public speaking, expecting silence. Instead, the room lit up, with delegates cheering and applauding. Afterwards, many came up to me and offered words or encouragement. What stood out most that night was that every delegate who gave a speech received overwhelming support, not just me.

Washington Week and the United States Senate Youth Program was truly *the best of the best*—not because of the 105 delegates (Tate!!!), the inspiring speakers, or the remarkable Military Mentors, but because of the way each of them pushed me to grow. I am not just a kid from Mississippi. Washington Week made me realize I am so much more.