

Cecelia Spencer, MT – 2026

Throughout Washington Week I found myself swinging between gratitude and wonder, both grateful that I got to be a part of such a wonderful cohort and amazed at the kindness, integrity and dedication of everyone associated with the program. Before I sat down at that first dinner, I had the kind of butterflies that you only get when you're extremely nervous or excited. In my case, they were caused by a mix of both. Then I was swept up in the wonderful chaos of the week, meeting kind people and realizing just how special it was to be able to count myself as one of the delegates.

The level of professionalism from the staff made me feel welcome from my first steps into the Mayflower Hotel, even though I was thousands of miles away from home. The Military Mentors were so helpful with anything, whether you needed a piece of gum or life advice. Every mentor I met truly lived and breathed the values that we were there to learn about: service, dedication, and love of our country. As delegates, I think it is safe to say that we were all a bit overwhelmed when we first got to know each other. The program is so prestigious and competitive, and I know I am not alone in saying that I experienced imposter syndrome as I sat down for that first dinner.

If I could tell myself then what I know now, I would tell myself that there is no need to be apprehensive. Although I didn't know it at the time, the people that I got to meet as part of this program turned out to be some of the most exceptional people I've been lucky enough to meet. Even amidst such a wide range of experiences and personalities, one thing was constant across every person I met. I could tell that they really wanted to be there and they were as curious as I am about the world and our government. In an age of social media, where everything is filtered and edited to create the illusion of perfection, it is rare to meet one person who is authentic and passionate, who is less worried about making a mistake than about missing out on an opportunity or connection. I can now confidently say that I know 104 other people who fit that description, and that they are all capable of amazing things. Every conversation I had inspired me, teaching me ways of thinking and being in the world.

A central theme of the week for me was reflection. At the end of every day there were so many conversations, experiences, and lessons that needed to be processed in order to be fully understood. I still find myself, weeks after coming home, turning over a phrase that a speaker said, finding a new meaning within their words. Even without all of the new information, I found myself reflecting most on ideas that I had known all of my life but never really understood until that point. As I got to walk in the halls of power within our government, I felt close to the people whose ideas had founded our nation. I felt close to the people who were brave enough to dream, to hope for a future so different from what had come before that their ideas of liberty electrified the world. I began to understand that as American citizens, it is our responsibility to honor that vision, to participate and protect our democracy, because if we do not maintain it, it cannot survive. As my generation grows and begins to act as leaders in our country, it is our turn to imagine the life that we want for the people that come after us, to ask ourselves what kind of world we want to create and then to go out and build it.

The skills learned during Washington Week are going to be invaluable in this journey. As delegates, we were told again and again that hard work pays off. We were told to be brave in our pursuit of knowledge. We were told to be curious, and not afraid of our differences. We were told that power is a responsibility that you must work to be worthy of. We were told to treat our failures not as finalities, but as opportunities to learn and grow. As participants of this program, we are now part of a lucky few who have been taught this knowledge first hand from the leaders of our government. We are entering into a world full of changes and uncertainties where, despite the obstacles, we all want to succeed and leave the world better than we found it. The future that we were encouraged to imagine throughout this program will not be created effortlessly. It will take dedication and hard work, it will mean making sacrifices that other people are not willing to make. Even though the work of service is not always easy, it is important. If there is one thing that I took away from the United States Senate Youth Program, it is that public service of any kind is the best way to make a difference. I feel proud to call myself an alumni of this program, and I am so excited to see the world that my cohort, the 64th class of Senate Youth, chooses to create.