

Caroline Conner, NC – 2026

Washington Week changed my life. Meeting the people I did, going to the places we got to go, and experiencing American democracy firsthand significantly altered my perspective on our nation and its political process. I learned new leadership strategies, how to engage in respectful, productive debate, and the importance of standing up for what you believe in through public service, one of the core values of the Senate Youth Program.

Personally, the most impactful part of the experience was engaging with the Military Mentors. I don't have any direct family members or close friends who have served, so I had not been exposed to military personnel much before Washington Week. Being able to have genuine, heartfelt conversations with members of our armed forces daily made a lasting impression on me. I learned how approachable, kind, and engaging they are. Sitting with a new Military Mentor at almost every meal was my favorite part of the program because they all had such helpful insight and so many amazing stories to share with us.

My favorite activities were going to the Supreme Court, visiting the Pentagon, and the Senate Reception. These were my favorites mostly due to the incredible speakers we had at each venue. Specifically, getting to ask Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson a question and hearing about current foreign conflicts from Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth were some of the highlights for me. The Senate Reception was special because it was an opportunity to meet our senators and engage with them on a personal level. My senators, Tillis and Budd, were very receptive to our questions and concerns, which made the experience even more impactful.

Additionally, my favorite speakers were ABC News Senior Political Correspondent Rachel Scott and Former NASA Administrator and Astronaut Charles Bolden. As an aspiring journalist and political communications director, getting to hear from Rachel Scott and ask her a question about handling adversity as a political correspondent was the highlight of my week. She was so inspirational and really encouraged me to pursue a career in media/communications. My favorite meal and speaker combination was our dinner in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum with Charles Bolden. He had so many great stories to tell about his experience as an astronaut and wisdom to share from his time as NASA administrator. This, combined with our private tour of the museum, was certainly one of the main highlights of Washington Week for me and is something I will remember forever.

Overall, this experience made a lasting impression on me and my perspective of how the different parts of our government work together to support the American people. I believe the most valuable aspect of Washington Week is that we visit the offices and people involved in all three branches of government and beyond. Having a well-rounded perspective, especially one rooted in experiences like the ones we were fortunate enough to have during Washington Week, is essential to being able to solve problems and be an effective leader. I will never forget the people I met and the valuable opportunities I had at Washington Week. It truly changed my life, and I am extremely grateful to The Hearst Foundations and all of those who poured their time and resources into this program.