

Jackson Wondercheck, NE — 2026

I have been engaged in politics in some way since my childhood. I listened to political talk shows instead of music, kept up with the latest headlines, and perused the *Wall Street Journal* print edition every time I went to my grandparents' house. I read about and listened to figures like the Secretary of Defense, Supreme Court Justices, and members of Congress, and little did I know then that less than a decade later I would have the opportunity to come face to face with the very people that drive the pathway of our nation, that influence the balance of power between the government and the governed.

Being a delegate to the United States Senate Youth Program's Class of 2026 was an exhausting, overwhelming, eye-opening, but overall incredible experience that has impacted my journey as a civically engaged citizen of the United States of America in largely indescribable ways. The most important quality that I saw firsthand in Washington was the general benevolence and commitment to service that many officials and bureaucrats had; despite political differences, we are all playing for the same team, and we all want that team to be successful.

What was most eye-opening to me came through my interactions with Military Mentors. The Military Mentors at the United States Senate Youth Program were one of the finest groups of adults I have ever encountered. They came from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints, but they embodied what it means to be respectful of disagreeing viewpoints, often serving as the anchor in delicate discussions, ensuring that all viewpoints are heard and considered seriously.

Coming from a family with almost no military involvement, it was incredible to see firsthand what a commitment our Military Mentors had to our democracy and the betterment of society. Especially in the current global climate, it was insightful to be able to ask questions about the current conflicts and hear the perspectives of those most directly affected by the decisions our top leaders make.

Sitting at lunch on one of the first days of the program, many of us still shy (we were VERY comfortable with each other by the end of the week), my group's conversation was quite sprawling, covering some of the hardest issues our nation faces. We talked about immigration, healthcare, the economy and trade, regulation, and everything in between. What struck me most was, despite many of us coming from very different backgrounds, we had a lot more in common than I would have anticipated. We are one team, working for the same goals, despite having slightly differing game plans.

Meeting our nation's top policymakers, the bureaucrats who carry policy into practice, a Justice who ensures it aligns with the Constitution, and my 103 co-delegates was an experience I will carry for the rest of my life. But it was the people who protect the ability for all of that to function within a democracy, those who have decided this nation is worth guarding with their lives, who have inspired me most, and challenged me to live with a new kind of selflessness.