

Shelby McDonald, NH – 2026

Washington Week was an experience unlike any other. Despite reading about it and hearing about other delegates' experiences, I could never have imagined how special and significant the week would be in person. From the moment it began, I was surrounded by people who shared a strong sense of curiosity, leadership, and purpose, which made the entire experience so much more meaningful. This week deepened and transformed my understanding of public service, showing me that it is not just about laws or government buildings, but about real people making daily decisions that affect millions of lives. It also heightened my respect for the individuals who serve our country, both in the military and in the government. Washington Week showed me how easy it is to connect with and understand people from all different walks of life.

The 104 other delegates who I had the privilege of attending Washington Week with impacted me the most. From the second I got off the plane, I felt an instant connection with the people around me. It felt like I was always meeting new people—whether I was eating meals with them, talking to them on the bus, or dancing with them during karaoke, I formed connections easily. Of course, there were the same questions in every conversation – “what state are you from?”, “what grade are you in?”, and “where are you going to college?” were asked frequently. But the conversations that followed mattered more – the conversations about people’s hometowns and families, schools and goals. These are the moments that have stayed with me, leaving me with a deeper appreciation for the diversity of experiences and perspectives that shape our nation.

From our first day in Washington, DC. to our last, it felt as though we were constantly moving. Between seeing monuments, listening to speakers, and visiting government buildings, there was never a boring moment – even the downtime we spent in the hotel and on the coach buses was filled with movement and activity. Looking back on that near-constant movement, certain moments and speakers stand out most. The Senate Reception, where I met both Senator Shaheen and Senator Hassan, was one such event – it was wonderful to meet two of the people who represent the amazing state of New Hampshire, and to thank them for their service. Another was hearing Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson speak, offering insight into her experiences and perspectives.

However, the biggest lesson I will take away from Washington Week was a theme we heard about constantly during the week, and one that almost every speaker mentioned—bridging partisan and demographic divides. In his speech to us, Thailand’s ambassador to the United States, Dr. Suriya Chindawongse, emphasized the importance of diplomacy in foreign policy. As someone who is interested in pursuing a career in international relations, he was one of my favorite speakers. He spoke about fostering a sense of peace and collaboration worldwide, and was incredibly inspiring. Many of the Senators we spoke with, including this year’s Co-Chairs, Senator Britt and Senator Markey, spoke about the need to bridge partisan divides in order to foster collaboration. During a period of considerable political divisiveness within our country, the consistent message about fostering a sense of unity and peace was very powerful. These lessons will stay with me far beyond Washington Week, as I know they will for many of my fellow delegates as well.

Brian Kamoie, a former USSYP delegate, left us with a quote by Mary Oliver at the end of his speech. He asked us, “What will you do with your one wild and precious life?” For many of the members of the 64th delegation, I think that by the end of Washington Week this question could be answered. We will continue to be leaders in our generation by applying the lessons we have learned at the United States Senate Youth Program—we will remain committed to public service, to working with others toward a common goal, and to bridging the divides between people. With our one wild and precious life, we will strive to lead, to serve, and to ensure that the voices of our generation help shape the future of our nation.

I would sincerely like to thank the Military Mentors, my fellow delegates, the U.S. Senate Youth Program, and the Hearst Foundations for this incredible opportunity!