

Neeka Vojdani, NJ- 2026

I'll never forget the excitement I felt as I opened the official Washington Week agenda for the first time, scanning over names I had only ever seen in news headlines. It felt surreal knowing I would soon be hearing from the leaders of our country in person. But what I didn't know then was that some of the most important parts of the week wouldn't be written in that agenda at all. Rather, much of my experience would be defined by the thoughtful interactions and insights of my 104 fellow codelegates. Walking into the Mayflower on March 7th, I had no idea how pivotal one week could truly be in shaping my life.

When I was notified of my selection to represent New Jersey, I was contacted by former delegates who described Washington Week as the best week of their lives. I had assumed they were mainly referring to the novelty of meeting with Senators and high-level government officials. Naively, I hadn't anticipated the most valuable portion of this trip to be my own peers and the connections we would form. From the moment I met my fellow tri-state codelegates on the Amtrak, conversation came easily. We talked about everything, from local issues in our communities to the small, everyday parts of our lives, and somehow, it never felt forced. By the time we arrived, I already felt like I wasn't walking into Washington Week alone.

Over the course of the week, those initial conversations grew into something much more meaningful. Dinner pleasantries in the Grand Ballroom turned into thoughtful discussions about domestic policy and foreign intervention. Over late-night card games and karaoke, we traded anecdotes from our respective walks of life. And waiting in line, in numerical order, outside government buildings, we shared our future career aspirations. Hearing about someone's home state, their community, and the issues they cared about gave me a broader understanding of the country than any textbook ever could. I gained perspectives and formed lifelong friendships spanning all over the nation.

Beyond the companionship of my peers, I fostered meaningful connections with our Military Mentors. They not only provided a sense of structure, but also so much kindness and humor throughout the week. I enjoyed hearing about their unique paths towards service, and it made me realize how many different forms leadership can take. The men and women in uniform truly took the time to give us valuable advice and offer support. Through their example, I was reminded of our shared responsibility to serve, as their experiences and accolades embodied the standard of excellence our nation strives to uphold.

As the week progressed, my notebook filled up with quotes and reflections sparked by each speaker's remarks. Our first distinguished guest, Bill Doherty, spoke about his work on political depolarization through Braver Angels, urging us to consider how a person's lived experiences have shaped their political beliefs and to approach conversation in search of shared common ground. Later, sitting in the Supreme Court, listening to Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson share her insights was equally impactful. She emphasized the importance of hard work and developing a mindset of dedication, noting the line, "heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but they, while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night." That idea stayed with me, not just as a reflection of her own work ethic, but also as an inspiration for me to live life with the same mindset. Another moment that stood out to me was hearing Charles Bolden speak about his experience as a former NASA administrator and astronaut. He left us all with the powerful message that it's not your job to make someone else feel like you belong in the room; you already belong. Sitting in those spaces, surrounded by leaders in public service, his words really changed the way I viewed myself and my place in those rooms.

On Friday evening, as the program came to a close, I felt a bittersweet sense of finality. I knew I could no longer engage in meaningful conversations at the Pentagon or sit down for a three-course meal in the Benjamin Franklin State Dining Room. The experiences Washington Week granted me were truly once-in-a-lifetime, but it is the connections I formed that I know will last far beyond the week. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to represent the great state of New Jersey, and I will cherish these memories throughout the rest of my life. Returning home and placing the agenda on my desk, I found myself reflecting on a question posed earlier in the week by Brian Kamoie: "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" For the delegates of the 64th annual United States Senate Youth Program, I am confident that the future holds extraordinary promise.