

## Margaret Collins, NM – 2026

While eagerly awaiting Washington week, I looked through past delegates' reflections on their experience. Many said things along the lines of "Washington Week changed my life," and while yes, I was extremely excited to have been selected for this scholarship, to visit DC, and do all the things USSYP entails, I don't think I fully understood the gravity of what was to come. The greatness of Washington Week isn't solely in the magnificent buildings or the important names. I also found massive impact in the conversations and internal contemplations. Every time I scroll through my camera roll I am reminded of all of the unbelievable experiences throughout this week as well as the friends I made across the country.

In a very literal way, my life DID change during that week. When I flew to DC (alone, for the first time!) On Saturday, March 7th, I was 17 years old. Upon my return home, I was an adult, having celebrated my birthday in Washington. I went into Washington Week hoping for guidance, for direction. Many of us delegates were seniors, at a crossroads in our lives as we leave behind our accomplishments and accolades of high school and take the jump into what's next. One major thing I took away from the Washington Week speakers is that to achieve your goals and pursue success, you have to be willing to face hard decisions and commit yourself to excellence. The people we heard from, whether it be at the State Department, Senate, Pentagon, or any of the other highly esteemed venues we visited, are individuals who have shown a rare drive and passion. I was inspired when Brain Kamoie echoed the words of Mary Oliver, "What will you do with your one wild and precious life?" Throughout the week this question echoed through my mind. With every display of excellence and commitment I was forced to consider my place in life, and my next steps.

While every speaker and location was notable, and I could write about every day, I trust that my fellow delegates will each do a fantastic job covering the events of the week. Therefore - I will highlight a few things I found important to me and my future.

A major piece of this week for me was the understanding of service. As someone who plans on serving our nation in the military or federal law enforcement, I went into this week with a unique perspective and was driven to soak up as much as I could regarding this field of service. There were many opportunities for this, but I will highlight two: the Military Mentors and the Pentagon. The decision to serve our country, specifically in the military, is not an easy one. Men and women make that decision knowing they will face many adversities throughout their career, from intense training to the possibility of making the ultimate sacrifice. Having the opportunity to interact with the Military Mentors was easily one of the most impactful pieces of my week. I wanted to observe and hear everything they had to say. To be honest, I had a personal mission to sit by a Military Mentor at every meal. For any delegate who would have preferred we discussed a different topic, I apologize. And if any of the mentors got tired of my questions and requests for insights, I also apologize. But nonetheless, I marveled at every mentor interaction. Hearing from every branch and every route to becoming an officer gave me diverse insights. These officers have committed themselves to leadership, excellence, and service. Leaving Washington Week I felt inspired to accomplish even half of what they had, and every day I have a drive to serve others before myself just as they do every day.

Second, the Pentagon. This was the event I was the most eager for. I mean come on, THE Pentagon?! This was a big deal for the national security fanatic in me. When we were there, my heart raced, I'm not sure I blinked, and I was definitely grinning ear to ear the whole time. I'm guessing my lovely roommate, Esther (CT), questioned my sanity as I expressed my excitement leading up to the day we went to the venue. I truly felt like a kid in a candy store. Beyond this, of course, were the speakers. We had the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to talk to two of the most powerful leaders of our country to protect our citizens and interests everyday: the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine, and the Secretary of War Pete Hegseth. Both of these individuals took time out of their extremely busy (and highly secured) day, during a time of conflict, to talk to us. This alone was an honor. Then, I was able to ask General Caine a question about military leadership. Not to sound crazy, but I freaked out. I mean, I got to ask THE DAN CAINE a question?! The coolest moment of my life, nothing compares.

These are the types of experiences that Washington Week gives you. All you have to do is be willing to engage and listen, and you will make memories that others can only dream of.

I want to end this by expressing my gratitude for this program and everyone who made it special. To be honest, I applied to this program while looking for scholarships, then was further encouraged because, well, I love DC and politics. When I found out I was a finalist in my state, I was shocked and a bit worried because I had a congressional service academy nomination interview the same morning as the finalist competition. This is where I first saw the impact of this program. My state coordinators were so kind and passionate about education. This is also where I met my co-delegate, Faith Young. Meeting Faith has genuinely changed my life. Just like so many of the delegates, Faith is extremely smart, driven, and passionate about people and politics. Without USSYP, I may have never met her. Then, it would be impossible to talk about USSYP without acknowledging my unending gratitude for the Hearst Foundations. As someone who tries my best to be financially responsible and aware, I am very cognizant of the generosity of this foundation. Not only do they make USSYP possible, they make it a luxurious week that surely no one can forget. On top of this, they show their investment in the future of education, politics, and each delegate is blessed to attend through the scholarship which accompanies Washington Week. Thank you so much for every incredible meal, the beautiful hotel, the life-long connections, and all of the tours and behind-the-scenes access to what makes our country so great. It was truly the experience of a lifetime.