

Emmanuel Williams, OH – 2026

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

When I arrived in D.C. as part of the 64th annual United States Senate Youth Program, I hoped to get some cool photos, meet a few impressive people, and have a week I would remember. Meeting prominent leaders, Senators, and Cabinet Secretaries was, of course, unforgettable. But what I care about most were the interactions and conversations I had with my 104 peers.

My military mentor group was a source of constant interest and laughter throughout the week. We had a unique and rowdy chemistry that I'm sure many of the other groups had as well. Outside the scheduled events, I found myself in long, honest conversations with other delegates about our worldviews, religions, doubts, hopes, and struggles. Those talks, which stretched well past midnight by the end of the week, were the most meaningful. We were candid and vulnerable with one another, and I felt honored to be trusted with those conversations. By far my favorite aspect of the program is that it brought together so many diverse people who felt no need for pretense. In that environment, we were able to share ideas and experiences with an unparalleled openness that was extraordinarily valuable. I left Washington a better peer and a better human because of it. I will be forever grateful for the friends I made.

My biggest takeaway from Washington Week was the humanity of our leaders. Being in the same room as people I only see online, and noticing their mannerisms, idiosyncrasies, and how their values came through in speaking, provided me hope and confidence in our country's leaders, even if I'm not aligned with them politically. I am a particularly cynical person, but this experience made me a little less so. Having discussions with these people reminded me that they are the same as me. That kind of understanding simply cannot come through in a classroom or through a screen.

I also left Washington Week with a newfound respect and admiration for the military. Our Military Mentors played an essential role in our week, and their presence added depth to the experience that I had not anticipated. My mentor, Lieutenant Benjamin Currey, was especially impactful; he was both a mentor and a friend. When we visited Arlington National Cemetery, he spoke to us about why service and places of remembrance like Arlington matter so deeply. Paraphrasing his words, people do not ultimately die for an abstract idea of their country; they die for their friends and fellow service members beside them.

Next, watching delegates and leaders on all “sides of the aisle” wrestle with the same questions as me showed that, despite our differences, many of us share the same goal to build lives we are proud and happy of. Furthermore, despite all the delegates being so outstandingly accomplished, there was an absence of both competition and comparison. No one felt the need to prove they belonged. It was easy to be yourself. This feeling was especially unique to Senate Youth; I have been at many programs and conferences for high schoolers throughout the years, and none have achieved this, save Senate Youth.

In this vein, I was amazed by how quickly people became so comfortable with each other. A special shoutout to photographer Jakub Mosur, who memorized all of our names before the week even began. I also greatly appreciated our master of ceremonies, JB, who executed housekeeping perfectly. It was clear to me, and all the delegates, that the foundation had enlisted the most phenomenal individuals into the leadership of the program and the planning and execution of Washington Week.

While the entire week blends together in my head, it was also filled with an excess of moments I will not soon forget. I smiled and laughed exorbitantly. I discussed political polarization way, way too much. I showed many of my peers some cool magic tricks. I ate like a king at every meal extravaganza.

Washington Week gave me something far more valuable than photos or impressive meetings. It gave me relationships that remind me service is ultimately about caring enough for others to listen and act on their behalf. If I can spend my life doing that, then I think I will have done something worthy with this one wild and precious life. I dedicate my Washington Week to my mother and the greatest person I know, Christina Karuna, without whom nothing I have done would be possible.