

Camdyn Evans, SC – 2026

From the Halls of Montezuma to the Moon: A Week in Washington

Have you ever dreamed so vividly that it became reality? Welcome to Washington Week.

For months, I attempted to imagine what this week would look like. This trip would feature a lot of “firsts” for me. First flight to Washington, D.C., first week away from home, first time meeting an astronaut... I tried to picture myself at The Mayflower Hotel or the U.S. Department of State. I envisioned walking into the White House and touring the Pentagon. I wanted to visualize it so I could prepare myself. Nothing could have prepared me for the 7 days that shaped my life. The fast-paced week ended as quickly as it began, but the memories will last forever. I left Washington, D.C., with a clearer sense of purpose, a renewed passion for politics, and a deeper admiration for our military.

Throughout the week, each speaker had different stories and talents, but they all had one common goal: connection. Senator Katie Britt highlighted her compromise with fellow senators across the aisle. Rachel Scott revealed her best tips for strong communication and bipartisan accountability. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson discussed her unique role and the importance of the judicial branch. I was inspired by these successful women and empowered by their encouragement.

The most influential day of my week began at the National Archives. Stepping into the Rotunda to gaze at our nation’s most important documents had such an impact on me. American history has never felt more tactile than standing in front of the Declaration of Independence. Faded and tarnished, representing 250 years of American blood, sweat, and tears, the document stands the test of time and defends freedom. It was a true Nicholas Cage moment.

Later, we visited NASA and toured the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. I was thrilled to introduce Retired Major General Charles Bolden as our guest speaker at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. He is known for his service in the Marine Corps, his 4 space missions, and his tenure as the NASA administrator. As a fellow South Carolinian, I loved discussing state politics, space exploration, and sports with Mr Bolden during dinner. Listening to his story of meeting his Russian counterparts before their space mission reinforced the general idea of conversation and compromise that followed us throughout the week. At first, he refused to meet with the fellow astronauts because, as he joked, in the military, “I was taught to kill them,” and vice versa. However, he discovered that they had more in common than they thought.

Through all of the exhilarating sights and exciting speakers, the reassuring presence of our Military Mentors was the solid rock of Washington Week. Previously, I did not have much experience with men and women in uniform. Their principles and patriotism deepened my respect for our military. Their passion and dedication to our country influenced me in a way words could not describe. Conversely, their humor and honesty revealed their true identities. For instance, Coach 3 created a signature chant inspired by our Marine Corps members... “Ooh...Ahh...OOH RAH!” Our Military Mentors shaped the trajectory of our week.

An unexpected part of my experience in Washington, DC included visiting the Speaker's Balcony at the US Capitol. Since the Capitol is the center of the city, this view was spectacular. It put everything in perspective, as it symbolizes the heart of the nation. It's mesmerizing to imagine that all roads truly lead to the Capitol in the city. The intrinsic and historical importance

of this is often overlooked in the modern era, but the capital itself is a demonstration of both history and history in the making.

It is important to note how grateful the USSYP Class of 2026 is for the scholarship increase, especially me. This scholarship allows the program to leave a lasting effect after Washington Week, and I am so thankful for the Hearst Foundations and its financial support of the delegates.

I have never been more proud to represent the great state of South Carolina. The weeks following Washington Week have been full of bittersweet memories, anecdotes, and little details tucked away, waiting for me to rediscover. The girls' gift exchange fostered friendship long before our planes landed in Washington, D.C. The group chats and social media tags created a much-needed online community of like-minded individuals. The meals and conversations around the table personalized the week and often changed my perspective. The willingness to hear every opinion and discuss pressing political issues enhanced my interactions with fellow delegates. The bond between my co-delegate and me is something I will cherish forever.

The United States Senate Youth Program was dreamlike in its overwhelming magnitude and unparalleled opportunity, but the lessons learned and connections formed are a blast back to reality. That's one small step during Washington Week, one giant leap into the rest of our lives.