

Kyla Leggette, VA – 2026

“The torch must be passed.”

These words, spoken by Dr. Alveda King, ring true as I write this essay, trying to make sense of the scribbles I wrote in my United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) notebook in the hopes of capturing every word each speaker said. Writing this, I know there will be future delegates combing through essays to prepare themselves for this experience — just like I did. However, from overthinker to overthinker, nothing can truly prepare you for Washington Week.

When I was accepted into the program, I sat in my counselor’s office and could only repeat “thank you” as my brain tried to process what it meant. Preparing for Washington Week, I found myself trying to piece together who we would hear from and what the experience would be like. Would we meet a Supreme Court Justice, hear from Senators, or witness government in action?

Now, after processing the whirlwind of Washington, I can tell you that while this excitement was not unfounded—it was only slightly misdirected. While we did hear from Associate Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, many Senators, and experienced life in government, the most meaningful part was meeting my cohort of delegates and Military Mentors.

The most impactful moments were shared over a slightly bitter cup of coffee, discussing topics that ranged from the best order for “dirty soda”—a Utah staple—to elections held over Discord in Nepal. Passing the bread around, I immersed myself in what it truly meant to experience diverse viewpoints. In these unfiltered conversations, I saw what true democracy looks like. I was challenged on each viewpoint I presented at the lunch or dinner table, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Washington Week is a time when you will forge unbreakable bonds. Do not miss this opportunity by being scared to speak up. Start the wild conversations, express your genuine interests, be eccentric in who you are—because you just might find your twin flame.

With that being said, it would be foolish to overlook the moments outside of the Grand Ballroom of the Mayflower. From bumping K-pop in my dorm with my roommate (shout out Hayley) to shaking hands with Senator Tim Kaine, each experience built upon each other to create the most amazing dish present at USSYP—public service with a side of genuine amazement and fun.

Writing this essay, there is nothing I miss more than the sleepless nights of USSYP. Without Washington Week, I can truly say I would not be who I am now. I learned so much—simply because I was given the opportunity to pick so many intelligent brains over the most silly and serious topics present on the planet. While I still might not fully grasp the ins and outs of what it means to be a public servant—something I expect many do not know until they’ve completed their career—I do know I am more prepared to serve the American people. So, if you are ever given this amazing opportunity, never let it slip away.

So, as I finish this reflection essay and pass on the torch, I hope the next delegates that break open the white chocolate dome together understand the privilege of experiencing the United States Senate Youth Program.

Hopefully I’ll see you next year at the Alumni luncheon, Kyla Leggette