

Selayna Rudolph, WA – 2026

I will only ever be able to describe this experience with one phrase.

The Class of 2026 United States Senate Youth Program shared a deeply impactful week together in Washington, D.C. Not only were we guided through historic landmarks and institutions, but we were also given the opportunity to engage with some of the highest forms of leadership in our country. We encountered students and adults from every side of the aisle, representing a wide spectrum of backgrounds and lived experiences. Yet, despite these differences, one of the most meaningful lessons I took away from this week was finding our similarities as peers across the nation. As it turns out, many of those commonalities are rooted in our struggles.

Within the United States, young people have been a continuously marginalized group. Teenagers and young adults are frequently dismissed during important discussions, their voices never held in much regard. Even as society continues to progress, this reality persists, either in our local communities, schools, or state governments. Many of the peers I spoke with expressed a shared frustration: it can be hard to feel like we are being taken seriously by the adults in the room. We must work even harder to bring our ideas to the table, no matter how informed or thoughtfully developed they may be.

Nevertheless, history repeatedly demonstrates the power and persistence of young voices helping to create meaningful change. Many delegates have even shared inspiring stories of leadership and impact, often achieved in the face of resistance or a lack of support. My experience in Washington, D.C., however, began to challenge this perception.

From the first speaker to the last, it was very apparent that this program differed from standard “teenage leadership” organizations. Unlike other programs, we were never guided or asked to “turn to a neighbor” and discuss, or “write out our thoughts” on a certain topic. Instead, from our very first evening together, it was clear that our selection signified a level of trust in our ability to engage in productive, independent dialogue. It showed us that we had earned our seat at the table.

We were treated as individuals who were determined to expand our understanding, rather than conform to one way of thinking. Our perspectives were valued because, in a world that can often feel overwhelming and complex, we are actively striving to educate ourselves and those around us.

Majority of the adults we heard from did not address us like students or teenagers, they spoke to us like *Americans*. While their guidance was tailored to our transitions into adulthood and higher education, I began to feel as though I was being included in an even more important conversation.

Not only was meaningful discussion encouraged amongst delegates, but also with the adults present to advise us – specifically our Military Mentors. One moment during the week that particularly stood out to me was at the end of one of our hotel dinners. Senator Katie Britt, a rather anticipated speaker, had just concluded her Q&A session. My particular table had a lot of opinions surrounding her presentation which led to an in-depth discussion of her remarks. This quickly evolved into a broader conversation on political issues. As the conversation continued, other delegates started coming over to our table and joining in. What had started as a small dinner topic had led to debate lasting for over two hours. Throughout this time, two of our Military Mentors had been sitting with us, not just observing the conversation, but active contributors. The nature of our interaction made us all feel like equals at the table. In that moment, I realized that during this program, we were being predominately recognized as individuals. While we are delegates, students, sons, and daughters, we are also citizens whose voices are worthy of being meaningfully heard and engaged with.

The entire USSYP team consistently encouraged us throughout the week to “ask the tough questions”, and we always did. Yet it was through their support and confidence in our abilities that we felt empowered to propel our minds into the future and pursue our answers. From discussing topics like the conflict in Iran, the current policy surrounding working class citizens, or our education system, we were being heard.

While the program aspires to foster common ground among students, I believe it accomplished something just as significant. It demonstrated that the future leaders of this country are not only anticipated but actively valued and invested in. As delegates, we all have much more to learn as we grow into members of this great nation. Yet the assurance from this Foundation, along with the support and encouragement from our mentors, is something that will stick with me for years to come.

So, as I said in the beginning, I will only ever be able to describe Washington Week with this one phrase: “It was the first time I truly felt treated like a person.”

Forget conventionalisms; forget what the world thinks of you stepping out of your place; think your best thoughts, speak your best words, work your best works, looking to your own conscience for approval.

— Susan B. Anthony