

Juliann Harlan, WV – 2026

Growing up in rural West Virginia, I learned early that the world often sees places like mine through a narrow lens. People told me that certain opportunities would be harder to reach. They said it kindly sometimes, as if they were preparing me for disappointment, and other times it felt like a quiet warning about the limits placed on people from small towns. I carried those words with me. They settled into the back of my mind and shaped the way I imagined my future. I believed that where I came from would always make me feel a step behind everyone else.

When I was selected for the United States Senate Youth Program, I felt proud, but I also felt a deep sense of worry. I wondered if I would fit in. I wondered if my background would make me seem out of place among students who had grown up closer to political centers, closer to opportunity, closer to the kinds of experiences that seem to open doors. I wondered if I would be the only one who felt unsure of myself. I wondered if people would hear my accent and make assumptions about who I was or what I knew. I wondered if I would spend the entire week trying to prove that I deserved to be there.

Washington Week changed those fears in ways I did not expect. From the moment I met the other delegates, I realized that this program was not built for one type of student. It was built for all of us. I met people from large cities, from suburbs, from military families, from immigrant families, and from rural communities that looked a lot like mine. I met people whose lives were completely different from my own, yet we connected through our shared curiosity and our shared desire to understand our country more deeply. I also met people who understood what it felt like to come from a place that is often overlooked. That connection meant more to me than I can express.

Throughout the week, I listened to Senators, public servants, and leaders who spoke honestly about their own paths. Many of them came from backgrounds that were not traditionally powerful. Many of them had been told that their dreams were unrealistic. Hearing their stories made me realize that leadership is not reserved for people who start life in the center of things. Leadership grows from the experiences that shape us, and my experiences come from the mountains and hollows of West Virginia. They come from communities where people work hard, care deeply, and look out for one another. They come from places that are often misunderstood, yet full of strength and resilience.

Washington Week helped me understand that my background is not something I need to hide or overcome. It is something I can carry with pride. It is something that gives me a perspective that is needed in national conversations. Rural communities deserve leaders who know them from the inside. They deserve representation from people who understand the challenges and the beauty of living in places that are far from the spotlight. I want to be one of those people. I want to show students from towns like mine that they belong in rooms where decisions are made. I want them to know that their voices matter just as much as anyone else's.

There were moments during the week when I felt overwhelmed by the significance of being there. I remember looking around the room and realizing that every delegate had a story that brought them to that moment. I remember feeling grateful that my story, shaped by the hills of West Virginia, was part of that tapestry. I remember feeling a sense of belonging that I had never felt in a national space before. That feeling changed me. It gave me confidence that I did not know I was missing. It gave me clarity about the kind of leader I want to become.

I left Washington Week with a heart full of gratitude and a renewed sense of purpose. I am grateful for the conversations that challenged me, the friendships that inspired me, and the moments that reminded me that I am capable of more than I once believed. I am grateful for the chance to learn from people who care deeply about the future of our country. Most of all, I am grateful for the reminder that where I come from is not a limitation. It is my strength. It is the foundation of the leader I hope to become.

Washington Week did not just teach me about government. It taught me about myself. It taught me that I belong. It taught me that rural voices deserve to be heard. And it taught me that the place I call home will always be a source of pride, not a barrier to my dreams.