

McKenzie Smith, VA - 2018

I remember boarding the plane with the excitement of going to my favorite city and sitting there on the plane for the short 30-minute flight; I knew the plane was getting closer and closer to Washington, D.C. As large pasture fields became towering city buildings, when arriving at the airport I saw the Military Mentors, then quickly met and befriended the other delegates waiting in the airport with me. Once arriving at the Mayflower Hotel walking into this grand ballroom filled with noises and having the opportunity to meet even more delegates. What surprised me the most from this quick interaction with people from all over the country that I just met, this sounds cliché but so very true it felt like I knew them forever as an old friend.

I remember walking to a table filled with USSYP alumni and one alumni I will not forget gave me advice they told me “some of the people you meet today will become your lifelong friends and I know this because even years later I still talk to my co-delegates often. This week will change you for the better, and it will inspire you, I currently live outside of D.C., and I work for a nonprofit and every day I am still amazed and inspired by the beauty of Washington, D.C.”

The alumnus was right, it did change me for the better and inspired me more than anything to not only continue the pursuit of politics but also inspired me to dedicate my life to public service. In Washington, I along with 103 other delegates had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet and converse with national and international leaders on current issues within our schools, communities, and country. It was a privilege meeting the president of the United States, vice president of the United States, the first lady, Congressman John Lewis, and many influential senators including Virginia’s Mark Warner and Tim Kaine. I was humbled and honored for this rare opportunity to embrace different thoughts, ideas, and opinions around the challenges we face as a nation.

Coming back to home to Charlottesville, I want to bring the same exact ideas that I learned in Washington to strive to achieve my maximum potential in civic leadership and public service in my community. Washington Week instill the true importance of public service and that there is not a greater achievement in one's life than to give more than you receive.

It was such an honor to experience and meet such a vibrant and diverse group of people who are passionate about many areas, but all share the same passion for serving the greater good. I have to admit I am still in shock that I was selected and I think I will always remain in shock, but if I could give any advice to future delegates or to an applicant who isn’t certain if they should apply. Please do apply and if you are also given this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, the week will go by quickly please be sure to be present in the moment. Being in D.C. gave me a new perspective of how extraordinary our founding fathers that established a government hundreds of years ago that remains today, and the true importance of how fortunate we are to live in a country with democracy. Another piece of advice that I learned from my experiences is to write everything down in the journal that is given to you whether it be a quote from a speech or how you are feeling, write it down, and make sure to have your co-delegates sign your journal because they will be famous someday. Make sure to pack lots of Band-Aids and bring a warm coat!

I am forever grateful for the opportunities that United States Senate Youth Program, the Hearst Foundation, our United States Politicians, and the military mentors. Thank you again for the experiences and the connections that I will have for a lifetime. Washington week gave me hope and inspired me that we have many public servants now who are ensuring a future for us and now we will have the same responsibility to insure the prosperity of future generations. I am excited about the future because I know that my co-delegates and I will all be in public service ensuring that we will always strive to continue to become better people, a better country, and a better world.