

Bannon Price, AR – 2024

It's hard to put into words how impactful and lifechanging Washington Week and the United States Senate Youth Program has been to me. Looking back on our week in Washington it looks like a flash, a flash albeit of truly once in a lifetime experiences. When the week first started, I was extremely nervous. Would I find any friends? Would I find a group? Would I let the week pass like I've let so many others – staying where I am comfortable, not pushing my boundaries, not taking risks, not living the life I desire to live. As the week progressed, what became most evident was that there was no single group of a few kids for me, rather the collective of 104 delegates would be my group. I have formed some of my closest relationships and friendships from this group of people. I talk to other delegates every day, we facetime, text, go on trips together. These kids are my newfound family.

I knew the experience would be lifechanging even before I arrived in D.C. I knew that my fellow delegates would be smart, tenacious, and kind. And I knew I would leave with new ideas, perspectives, and opinions. What I did not know was that these experiences would fundamentally change my life and alter my journey in the future. I did not know the delegates would be the smartest, kindest, most compassionate, honorable, respectful, supportive, and empathic people I have ever met. I did not know I would leave the week with a changed perspective on life and my purpose within it, with new ideas about how I want to impact the world, and leave with not just a few friends but rather a family of 104 delegates who inspire me daily, of 17 Military Mentors who serve as cornerstones in my journey, and every single other person at the program who I know would do anything for me. I did not expect to have opportunities to meet the people leading every branch of our nation, from Supreme Court Justice Elana Kagan, to almost all 100 senators including both from Arkansas, to countless other civil servants, elected officials, and individuals who allow our government and nation to function. I did not expect to meet people who has inspired me in so many ways: Secretary Pete Buttigieg, Secretary Antony Blinken, and most of all the President of the United States of America Joe Biden.

The whole week was surreal in the ways it taught me the closeness of the government to the people. The politicians we so often idolize and deem to be so unreachable are simply human beings just like us. They have struggles, hardships, and bad days. They need us often in more ways than we need them. The week gave me a chance to truly focus in on the ideals of democratic governance and reinforced the pride I have to be an American. One of the most impactful moments of the whole week was looking out the window of the coach as we drove through Arlington National Cemetery. It was the tears shed as I watched the thousands upon thousands of gravestones rolling over endless hills that made me reflect on the freedoms we have and so often take for granted. Our freedoms come at a cost to the lives of others. I learned that how we use the freedoms given to us is how we can do our part to serve our nation. I am reminded of a question one of the Military Mentors asked us as we traveled to Arlington, "Did you do all you could?" I have reflected on that question almost daily since the end of Washington Week. It has become a motto in my daily actions. Am I doing all I can to use what I have been blessed with to do good in this world?

Leaving our week in DC I hold the title of patriot. Patriot for our great country. Patriot for what our nation's existence represents in this world. I have never been more inspired for what our future holds. I would feel confident with every single delegate being a leader of our country knowing they would be harbors of peace and justice and hold a true desire to make the world a better place. My fellow delegate phrased it best when he spoke about how much we learned from the speakers this week, each leader, changemaker, and inspirer, but who we learned from the most was our fellow delegates. These people are going to be lifelong friends, colleagues, peers, political leaders, public servants, our teachers, guides, and the future of our country.

The family I formed at USSYP is more dedicated to supporting each member than any other group I have been a part of. I still find myself at a loss of words that would truly encapsulate the week. The full magnitude of the opportunity, of the people I met, of the character I was exposed to and strive to be like in every way, of the network formed with two new friends from every state, D.C., and across the world, each aspect is so surreal in itself. I couldn't have asked for a better experience. Looking back at pictures I still have tears from the immense impact and joy that the program has imparted on my life. I wouldn't know some of my best friends if it wasn't for Senate Youth. I wouldn't know a community of close allies and supporters going into my freshman year of college. I wouldn't have some of the most intelligent people to give me advice whenever I need it. I wouldn't have the daily FaceTime calls, the trips planned with other delegates, or the interconnection of love between each of us.

The United States Senate Youth Program has changed my life in ways truly unimaginable to me. I will forever remember the program and the infinite love I hold in my heart for it. That love is parallel by the love for all 103 of my fellow delegates and everyone who allowed the program to happen. Reflecting on the program and Washington Week in whole I laugh, cry, and everything in between. The hardest part was saying goodbye. But leaving I knew that it wasn't just goodbye. It was see you later. See you later to my best friends, future colleagues, future elected officials, and future world leaders. See you later to the people who will change the world in so many ways. See you later to a program that has altered the course of my life, helped me find my true self, and know my place in the world.

Thank you USSYP, for everything.

With love,

Bannon Price