

## Anne Eilers, NC – 2024

It's not about me.

It feels remarkably unprofound that after the most influential week of my life, my greatest takeaway is four short words that I already logically understood. However, to speak with Americans who have dedicated their lives to public service, build connections with my co-delegates and Military Mentors, and grasp the potential I have to make a difference like never before, the fact that it is indeed not about me now holds more gravity than ever before.

Despite the fact that our speakers had such diverse backgrounds and experiences with public service, a common theme of each one of their messages was an obligation to the wellbeing of others. Whether directly through their elected office like Senator Cortez Masto (D-NV) reaching across the aisle for bipartisan gun legislation following a mass shooting in Las Vegas, or simply the usage of their platform for the greater good like Secretary Buttigieg intentionally being public about his sexuality to decrease stigmas, I found a restored hope that public service is truly still rooted in the public good. Speakers like Senate Parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough further deepened my appreciation for public service as I took in how positions that are almost never addressed in political discourse are still so vastly important to the preservation of our democracy.

One month after Washington Week, I am still processing the perspectives on selflessness I gained from exploring our nation's history. Touring Mount Vernon and the Lincoln Memorial provided insights into great American public servants, but I found the stories of those who put country over themselves that remain largely untold to be most impactful. When touring the National Archives, I found a letter from a fourteen year old boy written in 1940 to the then President of the United States, FDR. The fourteen year old, Gene Orro, wrote to the president asking for changes in legislative laws in the military. Further research into his story revealed Orro was a U.S. Army veteran of World War II, indicating that at just fourteen years old he likely lied about his age to be drafted to fight for his country. For a child to risk his life to fight for a country that would not change segregation legislation for another year is among one of the most courageous, selfless acts I can imagine. Even though he was four years younger than I am now, he was more mature than I feel I may ever be, yet we all owe it to Americans like him to remember it is not about ourselves. The epitome of selflessness that I saw in American history however was Arlington National Cemetery. Immediately as our coach drove in I felt a weight on my chest as I tried to process the gravity of each white headstone. Thousands of headstones of heroic acts, thousands of stories I could not feasibly learn the half of, thousands of men and women who lived their life for all of us rather than themselves. To not squander these thousands of untold stories, the best anyone may do is continue their legacy of living for others.

While I aspire to live a life for others, a life of public service as best I can, I watched in awe in Washington Week as my co-delegates appeared to already be there. I listened to stories of them creating real impact on their communities, through nonprofit work, the legal system, and political organizing. To be surrounded by a group of such brilliant, motivated students was the highlight of my week, and keeping up with them inspires me to be a better version of myself. I want to be each one of them when I grow up not for the LinkedIn clout or Ivy League acceptance sweeps, rather the passion, energy, and dedication to changemaking.

I feel supremely unqualified to offer any substantial insights about the value of public service that aren't plucked from speeches I heard during Washington Week. However, I can express an insurmountable gratitude for the entire experience, particularly a rejuvenated desire to make a difference through public service. Although Washington Week was only a month ago, feel confident that the sense of duty to serve others is something I will carry with me for years, hopefully decades, to come.