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Finding out I had been selected to join the 62nd class of the United States Senate Youth Program was incredibly exciting but also equally intimidating. Leading up to Washington Week I was extremely nervous. Here in Portland, Oregon, varying political perspectives can be hard to find. Before our trip I worried that while speaking with other delegates I'd have to censor myself or be on guard, prepared to defend my beliefs at any moment. But, the moment I walked into the Mayflower Hotel with my suitcase in hand, I was greeted with a beautiful speech from Mr. Doherty, the co-founder of an organization called Braver Angels. It was as if Mr. Doherty had somehow read me like a book and knew exactly what I needed to hear. He emphasized the importance of building bridges in a world where everyone is burning them—a simple yet powerful analogy that encouraged me to embrace everything Washington Week and the perspectives that my fellow delegates had to offer.

When I was paired with my Military Mentor, I remembered news segments that portrayed conflict and stereotypes I had never questioned, leaving me ignorant of the crucial role the armed forces play in our nation. I realized that I had burned a bridge with these preconceived notions. However, that first night at the Mayflower, I resolved to start rebuilding it; and when I saw Captain Grizzle's warm smile, I knew it wouldn't be too difficult. Each day, I made an effort to share a meal with a different Military Mentor, learning about their highly decorated uniforms and experiences in the field. I found role models in the many strong, educated women in STEM, brave change-makers, and leaders like Major Duarte, a fellow Latine American representing our comunidad proudly. Collecting their stories, I realized that they, like me, were there because they fundamentally believed in the goodness of our nation, and thus, a bridge was built.

As the week continued I also began to see that same belief in my fellow delegates. Together, we practiced vulnerability while engaging with speakers such as Secretary Buttigieg, who shared his experience as a gay man in the military and in politics. We demonstrated teamwork during the International Migration Crisis simulation at the National Museum of American Diplomacy, choosing to build bridges between nations. And on our final night, we were inspired as we cried together, listening to our elected delegates speak passionately about the bright future ahead for the family that is the 62nd class of this program.

The love that radiated from this family was palpable. Everyone cared deeply for this country, ready to dedicate themselves to its future, and to me, that was beautiful. This camaraderie was evident on bus rides, during group performances, and especially at the White House, where we watched the State of the Union address together live. I have never felt a greater sense of pride in being an American than when I stood, cheering alongside my peers for the change we want to see in the world.

Since leaving Washington, D.C., I've found myself feeling extremely hopeful for the future of our nation, knowing that the 103 students I met through this program are in it. I am in awe of our accomplishments and cannot wait to see the brilliant ways in which each and every one of us will serve our country. The end of Washington Week did not mark the end of our class's journey, as there are still so many more bridges for us to build, and I am excited to do it together. Thank you, Senate Youth; it has been an honor.