

Austin Rios, SC – 2024

Have you ever experienced a moment so vivid, so intense, so *alive* that you caught it and made it a part of you before it could ever fly away? That you keep it close to you, always appreciating and caring for it, thanking it for taking you to where you are today?

I could never fully enumerate the flock of moments I experienced during Washington Week, from connecting with other youth leaders from across our great nation to learning things about our government I could have never known otherwise. Posing questions to speakers, discussing policy positions, sharing history tidbits, snapping Polaroids, chatting on the mezzanine, debating, dancing, laughing, crying, hugging, yawning, eating, working, supporting each other, and so, so much more encompassing the flurry of experiences I keep close to my heart, deriving from both the week's programming and my fellow delegates.

One of my favorite programming moments was certainly visiting the Supreme Court and hearing from Justice Elena Kagan; the Court has often felt shrouded in an aura of disconnected mystery, yet being able to behold it in person and learn about it from one of the court's most respected justices certainly worked to dispel that notion in my mind. Additionally, I immensely enjoyed our diplomacy simulation at the State Department—foreign policy and diplomacy have always been a great interest of mine, and being able to act such a scenario out with the other delegates was not only an engagingly enjoyable experience but an incredibly informative one which emphasized one of Washington Week's central themes: *everyone* is human, and for anything to get done, you must connect with others on a human level. It is, after all, the one thing we all have in common.

Furthermore, some of my favorite speakers included Archivist of the United States Colleen Shogan, Senate Historian Katherine Scott, and the Civil Rights Panel at the Department of Justice. It was nothing short of eye-opening to hear from those operating within our government who are out of the public eye, and I found their passion and enthusiasm for their work to be most engaging above all else. To see individuals so vigorously immersed in and excited about their work was nothing short of inspiring, and it pushed me to wonder if such careers would be appropriate for me. Additionally, PBS Correspondent Judy Woodruff's presentation was a remarkably intriguing perspective on American government from an "outside source," and being able to hear her thoughts as an icon of legacy media in the age of social media, algorithms, and polarization helped make me a more well-informed individual, highlighting another colossal theme of the week: hearing others' opinions from all sides will make you a more well-informed, and overall more well-rounded, individual.

Of course, I would be remiss to let our once-in-a-lifetime experience as the personal guests of President Biden and his wife, First Lady Dr. Jill Biden, for a watch party of the State of the Union address go unmentioned. It was nothing short of a dream. From hearing from White House Press Secretary Karene Jean-Pierre to being able to have a one-on-one conversation with the Director of the Office of Public Engagement and former Mayor of Columbia, South Carolina, Stephen K. Benjamin, which was particularly exciting for me as a resident of the Columbia area, the entire night I pulsed with an ecstatic, electric joy and excitement coursing through every vein, every artery, every nerve ending in my body. And, of course, there was meeting the First Lady and then the President of the United States himself. I will never forget the look he gave us while entering the room, sharing his experiences as a Senator, speaking with such wisdom that only comes with great experience. What struck me the most was that President Biden took the time to make eye contact with each and every one of us; he saw us, recognized us all, and connected with us. In doing so, he cemented another of the week's most critical themes: everyone is valuable, and you should take the time to recognize them, for we all have something to offer.

The week's programming was not the only part of Washington Week that I hold dear to me—if anything, what I will cherish for the remainder of my life will be the connections I made with the other delegates. Never in my life have I been exposed to such diverse perspectives and ideas while still being able to connect with everyone around me—through anything and anything, such as the Mini Crossword, appreciation for libraries, southern accents, shared identity, similar music tastes, and more, I was able to make genuine and caring bonds with those around me. USSYP provides an incredible opportunity to learn about government and policy, but I assert that its most invaluable benefit is bringing together 104 students who *care*—about their communities, each other, and our nation—to become lifelong friends with each other.

Since Washington Week, I have kept in contact with many of my fellow delegates, and the more I do, the more I am reminded how grateful I am to have spent a week in Washington, D.C., with them. I often find myself thinking about various vignettes and moments from our time together—dancing bachata together, crying together in each others' arms, playing spoons with coffee stirrers, getting fussed at for making too much noise too late. Moments that connected us as people, tied together every theme we had learned through the various programming events, and helped us *internalize* them because we were experiencing them together.

Finally, I must also spotlight our Military Mentors, and I absolutely must shout out my own Military Mentor, Major Pellegrine. They not only conveyed to us that our military members are human, just as we are, but they also provided us with invaluable guidance and a sense of support that made me feel comfortable and stable. And to Major Pellegrine, I must say thank you—I hope you know you have left a permanent impact on me, and I think about you frequently and want you to know you have inspired me to keep pushing myself and never stop aiming to grow to become the best version of myself to support those around me.

I've only listed a few of my favorite snippets and vignettes from the whirlwind of friends, speakers, and lessons I learned during my seven days in Washington, D.C., while staying at the Mayflower Hotel. They have been critical to inspiring me to work toward a career in public service and to the development of my character, furthering my resolve to connect with anyone on a human level I come across for the rest of my life and use that to do good to my community and those around me. And so, for long as I live, I will never let those moments, those ideas, those emotions, fly away from me because now they are indubitably, unequivocally a part of me.