

Peyton Barker, WV – 2024

The tips of my fingers turned white as I gripped the arm rests on either side of me. My heart pounded against my chest as I prepared for what would truly be the best experience of my life. The airplane's engine roared to life, and we began to speed down the runway. The plane jolted into the air, I would experience many firsts throughout Washington Week, but I had already completed one and that was my first plane take off. When I arrived in the city my anticipation made everything brighter despite the rain drops decorating the car window. I was already excited, but I was unknowing of the memories, emotions, and love Washington, D.C. would soon hold for me. Following my arrival at the Mayflower I was greeted by smiling delegates from DoDEA, Hawaii, and Alaska. I have never experienced an instantaneous connection like I did that day. As I sat in the ballroom watching other delegates slowly trickle in, I knew this week would be magical and I had truly been placed amongst the best and the brightest group of students across the world. Little did I know, only five short days later, I would be sitting with these delegates in a room full of radiating excitement as the president of The United States delivered the State of the Union. I would not only experience this with a prestigious group, but I would be within the White House, a place that symbolizes the power, unity, and respect of our country.

Washington Week produced much gratitude and perspective for me in a variety of aspects. Since I was aware that this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, I wanted to take in every second. I did this by using my five senses in every situation. A moment I will never forget is walking into the Supreme Court; I was awe-struck by the visual beauty the courtroom held. As I looked at the deep scarlet curtains, the intricate carvings in the ceilings, and the vast wooden bench where the highest judges sit, I imagined that this was the true definition of elegance. Another example of this is the night of the famous "Capitol dome dessert." As the servers entered with silver platters pressed up against their shoulders a hush fell over the room as we all edged out of our seats to see what was hidden beneath. Loud gasps erupted from the first tables who had the quicker servers as a dainty white chocolate Capitol building was placed before them. Camera flashes adorned the room for the several moments that passed as we posed with our new best friends and a dessert version of one of the most significant buildings in the United States. Soon all the delegates hesitantly broke apart this awaited treasure and the flavors of raspberry, mousse, and chocolate danced across our taste buds.

With the speakers provided with this program it was almost impossible to pass up the opportunity to listen. United States Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan specifically stood out to me. In a world full of division and such strong polarization it is difficult to fill an impartial role. Kagan shared how she overcomes this but most importantly she said, "Spend time with people who fills the gaps within herself." She explained that we cannot lead to the best of our abilities if we are not willing to see all matters from two perspectives. This has changed my view on life since going home. I quit searching for the people I seemed more compatible with, but I started looking for those who had different experiences, theologies, and values than I; that way I can now be more equipped with a better understanding of all topics from different angles.

As I conclude, “There’s resume builders and there are eulogy builders, know the difference. This week marks the beginning of a lifetime of work to attempt to repay the generations before us. We are the chance to make a difference and live for the people who did not get to grow old,” Captain McGurkin, U.S. Marine Corps. This quote perfectly resembles what the 2024 United States Senate Youth Program did for me in my life. This program empowered me and helped me realize that the ability to make a difference really is in my own hands. However, as I walk away from the most impactful resume builder I will be a part of, I now know that I cannot enact change if I do not listen, apply, or act as a good person who genuinely cares about others.