

Cameron Mirmelli, AZ – 2025

When first speaking with alumni of this program, I continued to hear the phrase “life-changing.” “The people, the places, the things! Life-changing!” they would all say, not sparing any room for disagreement. At first, I didn’t buy their unanimous, unfaltering approval. “Guys, what are you talking about? It was only a week! How could it be life-changing?” I often replied—if I even tried challenging the tenacity behind their words.

However, as a now proud USSYP *alum* myself, I can see that “life-changing” only scratches the surface for how impactful this program has been for me. While I could write a whole dissertation on why, I will try my best within this page or two to share my “one wild and precious” experience—the people, the places, and things that made USSYP so “life-changing.”

Starting with the **places** (because why be conventional and go in order): There is no way to describe the feeling of stepping into the Supreme Court as an aspiring attorney, the National Archives as an avid history enthusiast, and not to forget, the White House as a hopeful yet disconcerted American. Feeling the energy of those rooms—the history they bear—was nothing short of remarkable, and an experience that alone could be deemed “life-changing.” There was one building, however, that stood out to me (at least, I did not anticipate it to have as much of a profound impact on me as I did the others), and that was the U.S. Institute of Peace. Coupled with the powerful words of Ambassadors George Moose and Luisa Fajer, the grandeur and expansiveness of the building gave me hope for what the future holds, even in light of the conflict we see today. It is this hope that not only imprinted on my heart that night, but also stood right beside me the entire week: hope for the future!

That brings me to the **people**, the most inspiring and hopeful piece of USSYP. To hear about the beautiful impact of the World Central Kitchen, to listen to the stories of the Expedition 71 crew, or even to just witness the presence of Marco Rubio only hours before he appeared before the Senate are experiences that I will truly never forget. Yet, when asked what my *favorite* interaction at USSYP was, these, despite being my second or third thought, were never my first. Instead, my friends came to mind—the 103 brilliant, beautiful humans I had the profound privilege of getting to know. Who would think talking about local policies could be just as or even more exciting than seeing astronauts pass through aurora clouds! Definitely not me, but this program showed me that our shared yet vastly different experiences are what make our nation so unique. It is never the infrastructure we have built or the GDP we can generate... It is the diversity of thought and life that our country imbues.

That leads me finally to the **things** or ideals that this program left me with: most prominently, the power of civil discourse. From kicking off the week with the Co-Founder Bill Doherty of Braver Angels to continuously witnessing the thoughtful exchange of opinion between delegates, I realized that, despite what our current political climate makes us seem to believe, we are beyond capable of productive, civil debate... even when we disagree!

This overarching lesson, inspired by the people and places surrounding me during Washington Week, has indeed changed my perspective. I now know that this “one wild and precious life” will not be done alone! Thank you USSYP!