

Karen Lau, CT – 2021

“I hopped off the plane at LAX with a dream and my cardigan... [I joined the Zoom room where it happens next.] Woah, am I gonna fit in?” Heading into Washington Week, I had no idea how many pen-pals, life lessons, memes, and “delegates and distinguished guests” were awaiting me. From hearing about Captain Scott Kelly’s 1999 mission to repair the Hubble Space Telescope to listening to State Department officers Katherine Ordonez and Manuela Hernandez speak about advocating for indigenous rights, sustainability, and environmental justice, the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) gave me the privilege of hearing incredible people share extraordinary experiences.

Judge Robert Henry taught us about the “least dangerous government branch,” the judiciary, and gave us, aspiring federal judges and lawyers, advice to know the weakness of our own case and the strength of our adversaries’ case. Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed fascinated us with facts about the diversity of the Senate; for example, in 1922, more than half the staff members in the Senate were female, and 70 years later, in 1992, there were two female Senators for the first time. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas told us that it is impossible to be a judge and rely on abstract principles; we’re human, thus, we must rely on our humanity.

Dr. Francis Collins, Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), advised us that stretching our horizons is a good thing, and we must not close our windows of observation into science in exchange for being an expert. He told us about the race to develop COVID-19 vaccines. He said, “Although we are rushing to save lives in our own nation, we must do the same for other nations.” Learning about his experiences serving three presidents at the NIH, using faith as a source of comfort, and even his 5:30 a.m. biking routine gave me hope about the leadership of our nation’s researchers and physicians who are guiding us forward.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, taught us about evolving with the evolution of the situations. On March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, he met with President Trump, urging him to shut down travel from Europe, a huge economic impact. He had to make decisions based on limited data, and he taught us to be flexible enough to change policy and give recommendations based on new data. When asked about the politicization of public health and the controversiality of wearing a mask, he simply said, “The enemy is the virus. The enemy is not each other.” Dr. Fauci emphasized the importance of working together to survive a difficult situation and pulling together by fundamental good principles.

My favorite speaker was Ms. Norah O’Donnell, the only woman to anchor one of three nightly broadcasts and managing editor of CBS Evening News. Journalists like her serve the public by telling stories that educate, enlighten, and answer the questions of the electorate, guiding their choices at the polls, and “making democracy work.” She captivated me with stories about the leaders she’s interviewed including Mohammed bin Salman, Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden, and Senator John McCain. She also told us about the decision of CBS News, the only major network to cover the story of Ahmaud Arbery, to fly her to Minneapolis to cover the protests after the murder of George Floyd, showing the “multigenerational, multiethnic group of people” united against racial injustice. Listening to her speak about having the courage to report the protests against police brutality inspired me to make a greater impact through storytelling and advocacy. The first thing I did once I returned to school was tell my journalism teacher, Mrs. Fitzgerald, about the advice for surviving in the journalism industry and covering Congressional campaigns that Ms. O’Donnell gave me.

At age 24, Senator Tammy Baldwin was elected to the Dane County Board of Supervisors. As a Representative when the Affordable Care Act was being written, she authored the amendment that required young people to stay on their parent's insurance until age 26, preventing insurance companies from abusing people with pre-existing conditions and enabling college students to have access to healthcare. She spoke about growing up with a pre-existing condition and how her grandparents struggled to pay for her healthcare. She taught us about the importance of declaring racism as a public health crisis to address disparities including the maternal mortality crisis. Senator Baldwin said, "When you break a glass ceiling, it is an extraordinary responsibility and honor, but you have to inspire others to follow." When Rep. Geraldine Ferraro was nominated to be vice president, she cried because of the symbolism of that moment and she continued to lead at the local, state, and national level. Like Senator Baldwin, I aspire to break barriers and reach across the aisle to fight for equality.

Gina McCarthy, the first White House National Climate Advisor, taught us about tackling climate change in the variety of environmental agencies she has led throughout her career. She designed the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative to reduce greenhouse and led initiatives to protect the air quality of downwind states. She taught us that building a clean energy economy is vital and we can convince people to identify good-paying, union-access jobs and work with communities that are heavily invested in fossil fuels to grow a sustainable economy. She shared her goals of getting to net-zero emissions by 2050, giving 40% of investment in clean energy back to marginalized communities. Her commitment to respecting indigenous communities, rural farmers, and even the biggest emitters like the oil and gas industry inspires me to continue advocating for environmental justice.

Noah Harris, the first Black man to be Harvard Undergraduate Council President, told us never to change or assimilate to fit in with others, especially at high-powered institutions. He told us to be open to letting college impact who we are, but drive our own change and growth. As a current student government leader, I hope to follow in his footsteps at college next year and make meaningful change by serving my community.

USSYP taught me to make an impact through diplomacy and bipartisan efforts, advocate for justice, and take bold and ethical action to serve. The lessons we've learned will stay with me for the rest of my life. I can't wait to serve our communities with my compassionate, driven, and unforgettable fellow delegates. After gaining lifelong friendships and role models by the end of Washington Week, I can definitely tell you, "It's a party in the U.S.A."