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In my town, students dread March. It is the only month of the school year with no breaks, holidays, or days off. This has been the first year where I was more excited for March than any other month. Going into Washington Week ONLINE, I had no idea what to expect; all I knew was that this was going to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I was right. However, the experience started well before official programming kicked off on the 14th. Weeks prior, I connected with dozens of other delegates through social media and Discord. We started off just chatting about United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) related things like the amazing welcome packages we got, but, of course, political discourse and personal conversations emerged very quickly. It took a while, but eventually we got all 104 delegates in one chat. We started having nightly Zoom calls, and I made connections that will last a lifetime.

I knew that I would meet fellow politically-active young people through this program, but I didn't realize that I would meet my new best friends. Through this program I was able to make connections with people from Maine, all the way to Hawaii. I was able to hear about their towns and their states and what it's like to live in different parts of the country I've never been to. I greatly enjoyed all the speakers and official programming of the Washington Week, but I am most thankful that USSYP helped me find my people.

After meeting so many amazing delegates from all across the nation, I knew that the week would be a riveting experience. The amount of intellect and power held by every single delegate is astonishing. I expected that the questions that delegates would ask to speakers would be interesting, but I was blown away at the thought-provoking and complex questions that delegates seemed to come up with immediately for every speaker. I was able to ask two questions, one to Judge Robert Henry, and one to Dr. Sharon Milgram of the National Institutes of Health. There is truly no other program where high school students can speak directly with such important people like Dr. Fauci or Justice Thomas.

As someone who is interested in public health and health policy, my favorite day was when we heard from healthcare professionals like Dr. Collins, Dr. Fauci, and Dr. Milgram. The pandemic has shown the world just how important public health is, so to hear from the heroes of today was truly amazing. They offered great insight into their lives and careers, but also gave advice on how to get to where they are. It says a lot about the prestige of this program that these extremely important and busy figures took the time to come speak to us, and I know that every delegate feels eternally grateful for those opportunities.

Now, Washington Week is over, but I still talk to my fellow delegates every day, have alumni events to look forward to, and have a scholarship that allows me to pursue an education with less of a worry about financials. Thank you USSYP and Hearst Foundations.