

Steve Mirabello, DC - 2021

Growing up in D.C., I've never seen my hometown more closed-off than in the past year. Access restrictions in response to COVID-19 were only increased in the aftermath of the January 6th riot, as imposing fences and National Guard troops separated the Capitol from the city. So, it's in sharp contrast that this year, characterized by the erection of so many barriers, was the year I was fortunate enough to receive unparalleled access to some of our nation's most influential leaders and institutions.

I received the news of my selection to the U.S. Senate Youth Program (USSYP) with a flurry of emotions: elation at my accomplishment, disappointment that COVID-19 would ensure a different experience than previous classes', and gratitude to have this virtual program when so many other events were canceled. As Washington Week neared, I enjoyed meeting my fellow delegates through our nightly Zoom meetings, round-the-clock Discord chatter, and joining the (best) Military Mentor group with Major Boston McClain III, who advised us to embrace this unique opportunity and always "shoot your shot." I jotted down his advice in all-caps in my USSYP-issued moleskine journal and eagerly tried to heed it throughout the week.

Our first speaker, one of my favorites, was former NASA astronaut, International Space Station Commander, and fellow twin Captain Scott Kelly. Captain Kelly shared witty anecdotes, like his memories of launching in a Russian Soyuz rocket (sitting in a cramped cabin with no countdown clock, waiting for a Russian voice to announce "ignition!" over the radio) or the perks of having a twin brother (always an available spare organ!). Recalling his early struggles as a high school student and later as a Navy pilot, he described his inspirationally-simple mindset: "If I'm going to fail at something, I might as well fail at something that I think is impossible."

The next few days were a whirlwind of dignitaries and politicians: former Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals Chief Judge Robert Henry, a 1971 USSYP delegate who proudly cited this accomplishment during his first run for public office; Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who encouraged us to read Court decisions for ourselves rather than relying on a reporter's summary; Dr. Anthony Fauci, who urged us to "make sure *you're* excited by what you do;" Secretary of State Antony Blinken; President Joe Biden; and many more, more than I thought possible in four days of Zoom meetings. My nerve-wracking highlight of the week was writing and delivering our cohort's appreciation remarks for CBS anchor Norah O'Donnell. I've grown up watching *60 Minutes*, and have been riveted by her groundbreaking interviews, like when she challenged Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman about whether he ordered the brutal assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Listening to these prominent speakers candidly discuss their challenges and aspirations, I came to realize they too had been unproven teenagers once, unsure about how their futures would unfold.

As I prepare to leave for college this fall, I'm grateful to the USSYP for this opportunity to explore the institutions that always seemed further away than their actual distance a few short miles from my home. I hope to someday return to DC—not just as an observer of my government, but as a changemaker within it.