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In any pursuit or area of study, learning by firsthand experience is the most effective way to foster a passion and imbue the highest level of interest. Hearing directly from the nation's most senior and well-respected leaders certainly made for the most effective experience possible. Even amid a pandemic, the United States Senate Youth Program presented me with an exhilarating, life-changing virtual platform to hear, learn, grow, and above all, experience.

From the very first meeting with my Military Mentor, our idea-sparker, conversation-conductor, and example-setter for the week and beyond, to the bittersweet goodbye on the last day, every single moment was filled with excitement. Whether it was the anticipation before a speaker arrived, the gleeful shock of President Joe Biden's surprise appearance, or the validation of hearing different answers to our questions, there always existed an aura of fellowship and community, even though hundreds of miles separated us.

Beyond pushing geographic bounds, this week also expanded ideological and knowledge bounds. Each interaction throughout the week uncovered fresh ideas – sometimes fundamentally different or in disagreement with each other, but always markedly unique, thought-provoking, and insightful. Even with arguments I personally didn't agree with, I still always found inspiration in these speakers. The very experience of hearing multiple aspects of an issue was simply rewarding. At the broadest level, our experiences with these leaders could best be summed up by this: different perspectives told by different people with different experiences in different fields. From White House Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy and Justice Clarence Thomas to Ambassador Todd Chapman and Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed, the vast range of the offices and responsibilities that the different speakers held was stunning.

While every single speaker offered personal, incredible perspectives, several presentations in particular stood out for their uniqueness. Norah O'Donnell not only emphasized the importance of truthful journalism but also gave short, quick tips to gaining a positive reputation in general. With wit and humor, Judge Robert H. Henry highlighted the judiciary and offered his personal outlooks for the future. From the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Francis Collins, Dr. Anthony Fauci, and Dr. Sharon Milgram all discussed the responsibility we shoulder to our neighbors, allies, and the world as the basis for thoughtful scientific research and inquiry.

Perhaps the strongest message we felt was the call for civility and unity. Particularly, in the valuable, in-depth, and pleasantly casual conversations my co-delegate and I had with our state's Senators Tom Carper and Chris Coons (which would not have been possible in any other year), we heard about the friendships and otherwise unexpected collaborations that happen behind the scenes every single day that are concealed by the façades of social media and pessimistic news. Indeed, remarks from all of the speakers emphasized the importance of identifying common ground and forging valuable connections.

I leave this program possessing a higher level of factual knowledge, but even more motivation, inspiration, and exigency to better serve my community and my country. Knowing that the Hearst Foundations and our nation's highest leaders have invested countless resources, time, and trust into us with the expectation that we will make an impact in our generation is incredibly humbling and exciting. We are fortunate to have been given these opportunities. The end of Washington Week is only the beginning of career of contributions to humanity.

At the end of the day, though, the most valuable connections I forged during Washington Week ONLINE were with my fellow delegates. Getting to know these brilliant, sincere, and passionate leaders is the best present that I can learn from and carry into my future. I cannot thank the Senate Youth Program enough for such a powerful, memorable, and catalyzing program.