

Caden Burkman, DODEA – 2021

I joined a Google Meet call on February 20, 2021 not knowing what it would entail. Before even knowing I would have this call, I was in my kitchen making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for my siblings (an almost daily routine at my home). But quickly, I realized that this was the call I was waiting for. My district USSYP director saw me at the counter and was the first to officially inform me of my selection to the United States Senate Youth Program. In tears of joy and pride, I found myself too ecstatic to move. I had done much research regarding the event, but no amount of reading or preparation could have truly prepared me for the life-changing experience to come.

Being enthralled by the opportunities to speak to such high-ranking government officials and career politicians, I did everything in my power to ensure that I would not miss a single second of the event: find a location with stable wifi (my high school) and buy a ton of coffee as the event would stretch into early morning local time (approximately 1:00 am). Quickly, all of my friends, peers, teachers, and district level administrators knew of my accomplishment and I received countless messages of congratulations.

Washington Week itself was a week which I don't think I ever could forget. Being filled with enriching keynote addresses as well as informative question and answer sessions, how could I? With the USSYP notebook at my side, I easily filled north of 60 pages with direct quotes, detailed thoughts and questions, as well as observations of a world I had never seen before. Throughout the week the 104 delegates along with the USSYP staff had the opportunity to speak with individuals spreading every branch of government at varying levels of experience in their respective branch, be it Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Clarence Thomas to United States Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks. There were of course, certain speakers who stood out to me in a very personal way.

Having the opportunity to hear from Associate Justice of the Supreme Court Clarence Thomas was, in my opinion, the most eye-opening experience of the entire event. Considering that Justice Thomas has very scarcely spoken within the Supreme Court itself, getting the opportunity to better understand his personal philosophies and stances regarding controversial issues (which he has ruling power over) helped me to gain a truer insight into how a Supreme Court justice approaches a case as well as how, overall, the Supreme Court truly functions. I feel it is worth noting that Justice Thomas and I have very differing viewpoints: he, being a heavily religious conservative, and myself, an agnostic liberal democrat. I was provided the opportunity to address Justice Thomas one on one and inquire about specific statements he has made within his career. Choosing to ignore differing political viewpoints, being able to ask Justice Thomas such difficult questions and receive a candid response allowed me to gain an enhanced level of respect for him while still preserving my own personal politics.

Another speaker with whom I resonated greatly was Senator Tammy Baldwin from Wisconsin. For almost my whole life, Senator Baldwin has been a major role model to me as she is a LGBTQ+ icon for having been the first openly LGBTQ+ female elected to the two bodies of Congress. Additionally, Senator Baldwin and I share common viewpoints surrounding every major controversial issue, spanning healthcare to foreign policy efforts. Speaking to her was a formative experience. Seeing her passion, her drive, her enthusiasm, and her sheer joy inspired me to envision the best possibilities and strive for nothing less.

From this event came a multitude of priceless takeaways, spanning much broader than simply the experience of speaking to such amazing individuals. Throughout my life, I have been surrounded by people with very similar political viewpoints. This environment has strengthened my personal politics, but also created a gross misunderstanding of other political viewpoints which I don't agree with. I came into Washington Week nervous to speak with people who disagreed with me. However, leaving Washington Week, speaking with such individuals has been my greatest takeaway. Being given the opportunity to hear out rationalizations for political beliefs and be able to humanize the politicians who are so often demonized in the media provided me with clarity, allowing me to have a better understanding of the current U.S. political spectrum and gain a deeper sense of respect for the field of politics.

Reflecting on this event is a bittersweet activity; on one hand, I am grateful beyond anything to have participated and on the other, I am upset in its finity. As the cliché goes, all good things must come to an end. But it is clear to me now, that the USSYP is forever. Sure, the experiences themselves are limited to that of Washington Week, however the life-lessons and the motivation derived from this experience lasts forever. It is something to carry throughout the rest of our education, career, and our lives.