

Adam Jones, ID - 2021

The United States Senate Youth Program provides a truly unmatched opportunity regardless of whether or not the famed Washington Week experience takes place in our nation's capital or virtually at the homes of 104 young Americans across the nation and our military bases overseas. I must admit that I was skeptical of holding the week's events online, however I can report that following the week's festivities, I was extraordinarily impressed.

Of the speakers that graciously donated their time to come speak with the program, I will lastingly remember three in particular: Associate Justice Clarence Thomas, Senator James Lankford, and Senator Joe Manchin III.

I had the privilege of directly asking a question to Justice Thomas, which without a doubt, was the highlight of the week. While the Justice's conversation with us only lasted about an hour, it served to not only educate us on the, "least dangerous branch," but also to humanize a man who I had only heard about through national news. It was quite amazing to go from learning about an American legend in school, to then having a direct conversation with the man just days later. It was a moment that I will never forget.

However, I would argue that the words that have stuck with me since our week concluded, were that of Oklahoma Senator James Lankford and a video containing a previous speech made by West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin III. I chose not to ask a question to Senator Lankford, but instead to simply listen and take note of the statements he made in response to my fellow delegates' inquiries. One, in particular, has continued to resonate with me. That being, he was asked about how his faith has played a part in his voting record within the Senate. He responded, "If your faith only affects you on the weekend, it is not a faith, it is a hobby." I did not expect him to say that, but I couldn't agree more with what he said. That one phrase, that one moment that the senator probably didn't commit to memory, but meant in its entirety, has stayed with me and made me rethink the way that I have approached religion in my life. Before Washington Week, my only impression of Senator Lankford had been what I could find on Wikipedia and from his speech on the Senate floor when rioters first entered the Capitol. Now, I am forever left with his quick, but powerful remark on the importance of faith not just in Church, but in practice in our daily lives.

Another unexpected opportunity was the chance to listen to a speech made at a former Washington Week by Senator Joe Manchin III. While West Virginia is not known for its political power, Senator Manchin is nationally recognized as one of the most powerful voices in the upper chamber. As the Senate is now evenly split between the two parties, the moderate from the mountain state now essentially controls what passes to the President's desk. But before his national fame he said, "No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care." In our time of political division, distrust in our national leaders, and the one year anniversary since the worst pandemic of the past century hit America's shores, caring for others has sparsely been more important.

This experience opened my eyes to the differing views of some of the most politically affluent people that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. While I was mainly excited to get to listen and ask questions to our nation's leaders, an unexpected bonus came from meeting my fellow delegates. Never would I have expected that the lasting impacts of this program would come from meeting young men and women from the Atlantic to the Pacific. And although we did not agree on many issues, my fellow delegates opened my eyes to views other than my own, something that I find to be immensely important.

Additionally, I would be remiss if I did not mention our great military mentor, Captain Tony Starks. He worked hard to make the best of the difficult situation that COVID had brought forth. General Patton said, "A leader is a man who can adapt principles to circumstances." That could not be more true, nor more evident than over the short week that I had the chance to meet with my "mentor for life."

Finally, I would like to thank those who made this phenomenal experience possible, from the Hearst Foundations, Mr. Steve Cox and Ms. Rayne Guilford who made Washington Week especially memorable, from the Idaho Department of Education, Mr. Peter Kavouras for providing me with this opportunity of a lifetime, and finally to my teachers, friends, and family who enabled me with the skills and dedication to apply myself to succeed.