

Christopher Lidard, MD – 2021

The story of my Senate Youth Program experience began with me anxiously scrolling through Instagram in my bedroom. It was over a year ago, the winter of a difficult Junior year, and I was aghast at how *behind* I felt. I had gone down a social media rabbit-hole, discovering peers my age and slightly older that seemed to have done magnificent things during their high school career. One of those things that was dauntingly impressive was participation in the Senate Youth Program -- and though I didn't consider myself that former delegate's equal, I knew I had to at least give myself a chance to stand amongst him.

Anxiety turned to resolve, and I was accepted to the program along with 103 other talented young people from the 50 states, DC, and the DoD Education Activity. Many of us connected weeks in advance of Washington Week ONLINE, which came and went as the capstone of the program. And in its wake, I was left with intimate understandings of three key concepts: relationships, compromise and humanization. These ideas will inform my leadership for the rest of my life.

As all 104 delegates' participation was confirmed, a virtual program all but necessitated the creation of a large group chat that included every student. As a result of this, myself and many others spoke frequently to get to know each other in advance of Washington Week ONLINE. I developed a bond with every delegate I had the chance to interact with-- I can say, without hesitation, that I found "my group." Beyond those that I am proud to call my friends, I recognized from the outset that I am also now acquainted with dozens of America's future leaders in government, the military, and nonprofit work. Having this shared experience with other students who share a similar fundamental vision of a better world puts me firmly centered in a community of people who will advance together.

Beyond the relationships I developed with other delegates, there were equally as powerful relationships to be found in unexpected places. As someone who aspires to commission into the United States military, working with our nation's premier officers as Military Mentors only solidified my desire to serve. Not only did I have someone to rely on during the long hours of Washington Week ONLINE, but I now have a lifelong coach, advisor, and confidant on whom I can rely for my future years in public service.

One can imagine connecting 104 of the nation's most politically engaged students can lead to frequent and passionate debates on all things policy, from the merits of capitalism to the downfalls of the dairy industry. Not long after the delegates were connected, it was clear where nearly everyone stood ideologically based on the perspectives they shared in debate. Moreover, the ideological distribution was exhilaratingly diverse. Not only did every delegate come with a different set of experiences and beliefs, but all of them were able to defend their viewpoints firmly and with grace. To my surprise, this situation did not breed division and hate, as is commonly associated with ideological diversity, but rather an opportunity to learn and develop in community. Beyond the practical fact that us delegates had to live with each other for a week of online programming, I sensed that even delegates with polar opposite viewpoints often held the

deepest amount of respect for each other as human beings. I have always been a proponent of compromise, and this experience confirmed that level-headed dialogue *is possible* given the right external conditions and mutual application of respect.

My true epiphany on compromise came when I heard Senator James Lankford of Oklahoma speak to the group. Known widely as one of the staunchest conservatives in the Senate, I did not expect to agree with him on plenty of issues. But as he spoke, more and more common ground opened up between us. As he addressed us, I was relieved to learn that most controversial issues are solved in a bipartisan manner, and that he shared many of the same values I did. Senator Lankford and I both share a strong Christian faith but express our values differently in our policy viewpoints. Nonetheless, hearing from someone I disagree with refreshed my perspective on the policy arena as a whole.

As I was selected for the program and began to get connected with other delegates, that same uneasy feeling of anxiety crept over me. How could I compare to the other delegates who seem to already be changing the world? It was settling in to the group chat and meeting people from across the country and world that assured me that everyone in this group was uniquely, wholly, *human*. While some of the delegates had started on major initiatives or won major competitions earlier than others, I realized that nobody was orchestrating some master plan that I was unable to comprehend. We were all, rather, high school students who sought to follow our interests in as many ways as I could find. Though I was still humbled, I was now reassured that I, too, could build up my life in the same way that had impressed me over a year ago.

It was this fact that I was least expecting to come up from one of our speakers. During a Q & A session with Senator Tammy Baldwin, one of the delegates asked her what her path was to be becoming a U.S. Senator. The most striking thing was that she declared she never had a concrete overarching plan, but rather took opportunities as she was given them. I never expected such a happy-go-lucky mindset from someone as influential as a U.S. Senator, but throughout the week there seemed to be a trend of peeling back the mystique from leaders at all levels of government. Just like the other delegates who were simply doing their best in the circumstances they were given, many of the leaders I admire were simply looking to serve in ways that they were presented. Everyone, from the president to a high school delegate, is *human*.

Washington Week ONLINE was a one-of-a-kind experience, both in format and in the depth of knowledge conveyed by each one of the speakers. Though I have much to learn about the spirit of leadership, these unexpected lessons on relationships, compromise, and humanity will serve me years into the future.