

Meghna Chandrasekaran, MD – 2021

Dr. Fauci said, “You’ve got to evolve with the evolution of the situation.” This has got to be the perfect summary of the first virtual Washington Week, a wonderful product of this horrifying pandemic we are living through. In times where finding the light is difficult, becoming one of the 104 delegates of the United States Senate Youth Program was the greatest light.

I remember sitting on the couch and watching a movie with my parents on a cold Saturday morning and I see a notification popping on my phone: “USSYP Congratulations! Important Delegate Information.” In shock, I went to the next room to read the email calmly and took it all in. I remember thinking to myself that I am about to meet the nation’s top-ranking officials, the people in power, and the people who make the decisions that impact us.

A few days later, I got to meet my co-delegate and the other 102 delegates virtually when we had our initial GroupMe, later Discord and then finally a Zoom call. I was a little nervous at first to meet everyone but within a few minutes, I was able to find so many delegates who were just like me. With similar stories, similar ideologies and the fun we had when talking to each other, I knew I discovered friends for a lifetime.

Fast forward a few weeks, it began to feel all so real when I got to meet Senator Van Hollen. Growing up, I saw Senator Van Hollen talk to my community as he grew up in the same part of India as my parents. Being able to converse with him and just share my thoughts on everything was so exhilarating. My hands were uncontrollably moving, throwing all my speech skills away for a second as I saw him entering our zoom but within a few minutes, our conversation was so relaxing, it reminded me that this could be me one day. After having a short but very insightful dialogue, I knew that Washington Week would be 10 times more exciting and thrilling.

The morning of March 14 arrived and in excitement I woke up and started to rushingly get ready for the first day of virtual Washington Week. With my professional attire, the coffee in my USSYP mug and my moleskine notebook ready to take notes, I, Meghna Chandrasekaran, was ready to take on Washington, virtually.

From day one, we were given an amazing opportunity to converse with people involved in our government. Captain Scott Kelly stressed the importance of compartmentalization and learning on how to focus on the stuff we have control over. Dr. Betty Koed has been seeing the Senate change and alter for the past 30 years and reinforced the importance of minorities and their roles in the history of the Senate when saying “All history is revisionist history.” Senator Tammy Baldwin talked about personal growth and empowerment when she said, “If you are in the room, the conversation is with you.” And finally, National Climate Advisor Ms. Gina McCarthy taught us to lead with empathy and optimism as we approach the issue of climate change as an opportunity, for “It’s not about the money, it’s about the people.” Each speaker provided insightful information which allowed me to ponder and reflect on my present and my future, and I am entirely grateful to be able to even have the opportunity to talk to them.

As an aspiring person who wishes to write healthcare policy, speaking with Dr. Francis Collins, Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Sharon Milgram was the most insightful for me. Dr. Collins was telling us all about the science behind COVID-19 in a hopeful manner which we do not get to see. Although the NIH is worried about variants, vaccine development has excelled, giving us hope to reach a new normalcy. Dr. Fauci stated the importance of funding for healthcare especially in this pandemic era. He also stressed the detrimental effects of polarization of health issues as it is not guided by an understanding of public health principles but rather guided by political persuasion. Dr. Milgram talked to us regarding the importance of healthcare policy and how we, as students, can get involved in the NIH and learn more about healthcare which deemed itself to be a perfect opportunity for me.

Although it was done at home, Washington Week served as an incredible opportunity to sit down and ask questions with our nation’s top ranking officials, interact with my fellow delegates as we unionize for our peers to ask a question to an official, and talk to our Military Mentors who aided us in asking the tough questions and helping us understand the nature of the situation. I am so thankful for the week of a lifetime and the connections and the friendships I have made which will always hold a special place in my heart.