

Hilton Scott Peterson, ME – 2021

On Wednesday, March 17th, I said goodbye to my new friends, clicked the “leave meeting” button in the bottom right-hand corner of the Zoom, and closed my laptop. After locking the window of the dorm room I was borrowing, I carefully hung up my cheap blue suit, stuffed my books and pens into the USSYP pack that I had received a few days earlier, and jammed my remaining snacks into an oversized lunch bag. As I stood in the door frame of room R1, laden with bags like a human clothes hanger, a perfectly unremarkable set of walls stared back at me. But, as I fondly remembered the few precious days I had spent there, I knew that my experience was nothing less than extraordinary.

It all started as nothing more than a dream. The United States Senate Youth Program had been on my radar for about a year, but I had never seriously looked into it. After all, how could I, a rural student from the town of Nobleboro, Maine, expect to share the company of the nation’s finest scholars in a program chaired by the vice president? It all seemed so far out of reach.

So, for a while, USSYP stayed a dream. In fact, I nearly missed the application deadline during the tumult of the college admissions season. Thankfully, my friends were available to look over my application, and my teachers and headmaster were willing to submit recommendations and paperwork on short notice. With a great deal of encouragement, I put my best foot forward. That’s the funny thing about reaching for the stars after all—you don’t need to do it alone. Thanks to the boost from my friends, family, and community, I was truly thrilled to receive a congratulatory message from Joe Schmidt of the Maine Department of Education. Before I knew it, I was submitting information for press releases and meeting my fellow delegates online. Just a few weeks later, I had the incredible honor of meeting both of my senators, who illuminated my co-delegate and myself on topics from climate to the Special Commission on Aging. And before I felt ready, March 14th arrived, and it was time to begin the program.

Throughout the week, we were introduced to incredible guests by our moderator Steve Cox. From Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy to Associate Justice Thomas, we had the opportunity to meet amazing speakers and record their wisdom in our moleskine journals. Perhaps my favorite moment of the whole experience was when I had the opportunity to ask Dr. Fauci a question—my feet trembled in the Fauci socks my grandmother had purchased for me several months prior. My little dorm had suddenly become Lin-Manuel Miranda’s ‘Room Where It Happens’, or as the Program Director Ms. Guilford referred to it, “The Zoom Where It Happens.”

The one thing that really stuck with me was an ongoing discussion of belonging. I don’t think there was a single speaker who told us that they had planned to be where they were now when they were our age. It was a profoundly reassuring message in a persistently uncertain time. Although my self-doubt had been nagging me throughout the experience, I realized that the ongoing support of my community back home meant that I had nothing left to prove. The true value of Washington Week had already found me in the form of wonderful memories, new friends, and a group of people back home that really cared about me. I quickly realized that it was my responsibility to take what I had learned from the program and share it with the community that I love so much.

And so, it all ended without the typical frills of a normal USSYP experience. There was no plane ride, no Mayflower Hotel, and no Capitol tour. But that cool, dark Wednesday evening, I knew I had spent my Washington Week exactly where I wanted to be.