

Rena Liu, TN – 2021

For many delegates, the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) really became tangible when we received our giant welcome packages, white boxes embossed with the program logo whose contents the delegate Discord server had begun theorizing about weeks before their shipment. When mine arrived on our front porch drenched in spring Tennessee sun, I scrambled through the navy confetti and found baked goods, merch — and books. The week before the Zoom Where it Happened, I carefully filled the margins of *A Very Short Introduction to the US Congress* with black gel pen musings and made sure to open *The Senate* at the bottom of our stairwell, where midday rays of light would breathe radiance into the glossy images of the Senate Chamber. I imagined myself under its domed roofs, surrounded by fellow delegates, about to hear senators speak to us in person—and was struck with longing for a Washington Week that I would not get to have. Little did I know that only ten days later, I would be sharing teary smiles with my newfound best friends over Zoom, recounting some of the best experiences of my life.

I came into USSYP with one goal: to soak up the experience to the maximum extent possible. From re-reading the introduction email at least five times to dashing to join the initial Facebook group, I was set on making the most out of both USSYP's investment in me and the opportunity to meet other young leaders. The early days of getting to know other delegates were vibrantly awkward as we floundered from Facebook to Groupme before finally settling on using Discord for communication; but to my surprise, they were not shy. We held a videocall on the first night where we stayed up until the early morning (for the East Coast, at least) giving room tours, exchanging life plans, and contesting Elizabeth Warren's acceptance of chipmunks. As delegates trickled in and our digital infrastructure expanded to include an unofficial meme account, meticulously assigned chairs in the Senate Chamber, and multiple fan pages, the USSYP class of 2021 transformed from a jumble of profile icons into a lively and close-knit community. I jotted notes on the ideas swirling through our nightly Zooms, spanning everything from expanding the House of Representatives to 100% land back initiatives, and marveled at the fact that I could count this group of visionaries as friends.

The ideas exchanged among delegates opened my mind as we hurtled towards Washington Week. On Saturday night, I carefully arranged my desk set-up—complete with my stout white USSYP mug waiting to be filled with ginseng tea the next morning—and stoically anticipated how I would stand ready to learn everything I possibly could from the starry speaker lineup of dignitaries, officials, and alumni. However, Ms. Rayne Guilford, Ms. Lynn DeSmet, and all of the others at the Hearst Foundation who worked for USSYP '21 created a program that shot past any of my expectations. I am confident that my fellow delegates will give accounts of everyone who spoke and the wisdom they shared, so I will summarize by saying that by the end of the week, I was left with a new vision for the future.

This new vision started with a re-evaluation of my own future plans — I logged into the first Zoom with my life charted out, but by the last one, my head was teeming with myriads of unexplored possibilities. My interest in foreign policy bloomed into consideration of foreign service upon hearing Ambassador Todd Chapman's explanation of his mission as a diplomat; but then, hours later, I was enraptured by CBS anchor Norah O'Donnell's "straight-to-business" focus and service-driven approach to journalism. Being an elected official has always been a goal of mine in order to implement hard policy that helps people. However, I never considered how those in office play a social role as well until I heard from Senator Tammy Baldwin. Her perspective about why representation matters opened my eyes to how I could make a difference

as a Chinese-American in public service, especially in a time where global tensions are rising and racism at home is flaring up. Another major revelation came when I let go of my assumption that I would spend much of my career in fear of the looming threat of climate change. On our last day, White House Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy framed the issue as not as a nightmare, but rather an opportunity for a revitalized job market and economy that serves the common man. These ideas and the many others filling my iPad (I reluctantly chose not to take notes in the Moleskines given to us in favor of the speed with which stylus glides across screen) have reshaped the way I look at the world and will undoubtedly influence me for years to come.

Beyond the speakers, Washington Week was also made great by those who facilitated it. My marvelous Military Mentor, Captain Meyer, was there for our mentor group to help us examine and reflect on what we learned each day, answer our questions about careers and the future with generous insight and encouragement, and be our advocate in everything from advising me on my awkward first draft of an appreciation to Secretary of State Antony Blinken to helping our group (go Jags!) get to ask the questions that mattered most to us. In addition, all the delegates and distinguished guests on the Zooms appreciated Mr. Steve Cox for his steady program direction, Mr. Jakub Mosur for somehow making us look good over videocall, Ms. Caroline Berver for her patience and determination in arranging our meeting with senators (and her excellent internship advice!), and the tireless efforts of everyone on the Hearst Foundations staff for making this program possible in a pandemic.

Finally, to my fellow delegates and especially my beloved Progressive Caucus: while we did act at an embarrassingly emotional level when Washington Week ended, I am hopeful for the future because I know that going into public service will mean a life working with people like you. As USSYP alumnus Noah Harris extolled to us that final night, we have the power to change the world. A month ago, this statement would have slipped through my mind as a lofty cliché. But now? I have confidence in every word.