

## **Sabine Mead, VA- 2021**

When I was little, I thought I could help by putting spare change in the poor box at church and donating my clothes once I grew out of them. If I collected enough BoxTops off of cereal boxes or played fetch with the stray dogs at the animal shelter for long enough, surely I could change the world. I've grown a lot since then, and experienced new things and met new people who have changed my idea of what it means to serve others, but none have been as influential as the United States Senate Youth Program.

Our virtual Washington Week officially started at George Washington's Mount Vernon home. As a native Alexandrian, I'm familiar with the estate— after all, it was the setting for almost every elementary school field trip. However, on the USSYP tour we spent less time talking about the vibrant blue and green shades of Washington's walls and instead had the opportunity to discuss Washington's contributions to our country and how we can revere his legacy while still holding him accountable for the systems of white supremacy he upheld. I'm pretty sure my tour guide in second grade left this out. Discussions about precedence and servitude both dedicated to and shaped by people who have come before us continued throughout the week, but they left me with more questions. Shouldn't we serve everyone as opposed to the few people "We the People" originally meant?

I continued to ponder the questions of who and why we serve throughout Washington Week. Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Gillis, my Military Mentor, introduced me to a new idea. During one of our longer sessions, she explained that service isn't dedicated to what Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed described as "archaic institutions we try to make work in modern times" or the people who founded them, but to something greater than ourselves. For Judge Robert Henry, this is the law. Judge Henry recounted a speech in which a rabbi said, "We don't have to learn how to love each other, we just have to learn how to follow the law." For Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, his service is dedicated to our Constitution and its precedent. When Senator James Lankford spoke with us candidly about his faith and its codependence on his service, it was evident his greater purpose came from something divine.

Personally, I think we serve because we love one another. We go to protests, we create petitions, we form non-profit organizations, and we push for change because we love our country and its people. I saw this love when Senator Tammy Baldwin spoke to us about her passion for ensuring her community had access to affordable healthcare and when White House Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy explained her hope for a more sustainable and energy-efficient future that she discovered through her work. I still see this love every single day when I speak with my fellow delegates and closest friends about the projects they're working on and their goals for the future. Public service is an act of love.

The things I learned from Washington Week made me feel awe and wonder, but also overwhelming gratitude. Every person I encountered, from guest speakers to USSYP staff to fellow delegates, taught me more about myself, our country, its institutions, and public service than I ever could have hoped to know. I have realized the world is a much bigger and kinder place than I thought, and full of more opportunities than I could imagine. In particular, this experience could not have happened without the hard work of Ms. Rayne Guilford, Ms. Lynn DeSmet, Ms. Caroline Berver, Mr. Jakub Mosur, Mr. Steve Cox, and all the dedicated staff at the Hearst Foundations who worked tirelessly to bring Washington Week to us virtually. Additionally, I would like to thank my home state senator, Senator Mark Warner, for his thoughtful comments when we met, my Military Mentor Lieutenant Commander Gillis for going above and beyond to support me during the program, and of course all of my fellow delegates who have helped me realize everyone has more in common than we initially think. The lessons I have learned and the laughs I've shared with you will last a lifetime.