

Mary Margaret Barbee, GA - 2022

“We the people” – Aside from being the first few words of the Preamble, that phrase didn’t really mean much to me before Washington Week. It simply blended into my memory as another one of those founding father related things that I was supposed to memorize in elementary school. Perhaps it was the pocket-sized book containing the Constitution and Declaration of Independence that we received in our delegate welcome boxes, or maybe it was the multitude of times we heard the phrase over the week, but I left Washington Week with a much different interpretation of those three words.

If there’s one thing that I took away from Washington Week, it is that we *are* those people. If you asked me a year ago where I thought I would be on March 7, 2022 at 3:00pm, I can guarantee you, my answer would not have been “sitting on a zoom call with a former Supreme Court Justice as a delegate of Georgia for the 60th annual United States Senate Youth Program”. Getting the chance to speak with and hear from some of the most influential figures in the entire country gave me the opportunity to make a realization: we all have the power to make a change.

Being surrounded by 103 other politically active future leaders and getting to interact with some of the nation’s current leaders, many of whom got their start in the same program as we, was nothing short of inspiring. I greatly appreciated the privilege of getting to ask fellow alumni of the program, such as Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg, and Senator Susan Collins, for advice and stories about their own Washington Weeks. I distinctly remember Senator Collins’ remarks about her time as a delegate and her conversations with former Senator Margaret Chase Smith, who told her to “stand tall for what she believed in.” In the same way that Senator Collins looked back on her days as a delegate, I know I will continue to reflect on my own, the lessons I have learned and the friendships I have made.

Hearing the stories of our incredible speakers over Washington Week truly made me realize that each and every one of our great leaders had to start somewhere, and as many of them did, what could be better than making that start with the United States Senate Youth Program? As I flip through my navy blue leather notebook filled with speaker notes, drawings, quotes, and questions, it becomes truly apparent that we *are* the people. As young, passionate people, we are the ones who can make a change. Although each speaker brought their own unique experience and perspective to our discussions, one commonality among all of them was their sense of hope: a hope for the future, for a “more perfect union.” In the words of Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta, “hope is a muscle, hope is a discipline.” Simply seeing the hope and trust that such incredible figures put in our class of delegates has been empowering and enlightening. Moving into the future, I already know that my time as a delegate has been one of the most educational and influential times of my life, and if our speakers happen to be right about us being the future leaders, I can confidently say that I believe we’re going to be in good hands.