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“If you’re in this room, there’s something that gives you goosebumps when the national anthem comes on.”

I gasped. No truer words, in such succinct descriptive manner, could have been uttered by Mr. Ali Zaidi, Deputy White House Climate Advisor and United States Senate Youth Program alum, to describe the experience I had during Washington Week Online 2022.

The Senate Youth Program gave me an opportunity to directly, candidly hear from speakers I had only ever dreamed of meeting a year prior: Associate Justice Anthony Kennedy, United States Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg were some of the highlights whose keen insights about the present - and future - of our government will never escape my mind. Their insistence on ensuring that every delegate selected for the program chose a career of public service left me with a heightened sense of purpose in my academic pursuits and community service. But the true honor of the program was meeting my fellow delegates: 103 other impassioned, dedicated, and thoughtful leaders who made our shared Zoom spread out across the four million square miles of the United States feel like an intimate Senate floor, where thoughts and ideas butted heads, challenged one another, and ultimately came out stronger.

Without a doubt, my fellow delegates and I had different interests, political ideologies, career goals, academic pursuits, and reasons for wanting to be in the Senate Youth Program. But the goosebumps we shared during the opening session of the program when the United States Army Field Band performed the national anthem unequivocally united us in our shared purpose of service to our communities and nation.

Coming into the United States Senate Youth Program, I was a local school board member, educational equity activist, student of public policy, and planned political science and economics major, ready to run for elected office after graduation. The Senate Youth Program, however, shifted my outlook on public service and exposed me - in a deeper and more meaningful way than I had ever engaged before - to a broader range of opportunities to serve ranging from diplomacy to the justice system to our Armed Forces. Completing Washington Week Online, I am now firmer in my belief that in a nation that has given me as many opportunities as the United States, and that values our future enough to create, support, and sustain a program like the Senate Youth Program, it is only right that I give back what I can in service, time, and dedication.

I do not know what I will be pursuing in five years, or ten, or twenty, but whatever I do, I know that I will be striving for a career rich in public service, to pay forward what generations of talented leaders have sacrificed before me, and to never lose sight of those national anthem goosebumps.