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I vividly remember the afternoon of Friday, December 3rd. As I was headed to my AP Statistics class, one of the co-principals of my school pulled me into her office. I was taken aback at first, racking my brain for things I could possibly be in trouble for. Before I could think of anything, I saw a familiar face: it was Joe Schmidt, Acting Coordinator of Secondary Education at the Maine DOE. I remembered the other outstanding students I met in our Zoom final competition and was immensely surprised when he notified me that I had been selected as one of the two delegates to attend the online Washington Week later in 2022. I was buzzing with excitement when I headed back to class.

Three months later, it was the first day of our online program. This was the first time all 104 student delegates from all 50 states and even across the country would meet in one room. While we were spread out over thousands of miles, the hard work and thoughtful programming allowed us to connect in ways I didn't know were possible over a screen. I am beyond grateful for all the people whose hard work it took to create such a smooth-running platform and an overall engaging experience.

The week was jam-packed with excitement. From a virtual tour of George Washington's Mount Vernon home to participating in an international diplomacy simulation, there was something interesting to look forward to every day. Unlike many other Zoom events, the online Washington Week was highly interactive. My peers and I were able to ask numerous questions of guest speakers and discuss a variety of topics in our Military Mentor groups. Yet, I know that for many, the opportunity to connect after the formal program hours was even more engaging.

Each night, there was an open Zoom room for delegates to join each other and chat. Typically, even with the option of specific breakout rooms open, the majority of the delegates would stay in the main room and talk about any and everything with very little organization at all. Though Zoom will never be quite like real life, these delegate hangouts came very close. We were all able to imagine what it would have been like to be with one another in Washington—without even leaving our houses. I know many of the other delegates could not get enough of talking with their peers from across the nation and would stay up until the early hours of the morning chatting on Zoom. The connections we made are unmatched.

Too many good things happened over the course of Washington Week for me to be able to pick a favorite, but I would like to highlight some of the other people we met and the things I learned. I can say with confidence that not many other high school students have had the opportunity to meet Pete Buttigieg, their two home-state senators, retired Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, the President's climate advisor Ali Zaidi, and a representative from the UN and NATO. I am beyond grateful for this experience and the knowledge and connections it has provided. Though our speakers came from a wide variety of backgrounds and hold ranging positions throughout government, many of them echoed one another's sentiments. The main thing I remember taking from nearly every speaker was that political polarization and division is perhaps the biggest challenge facing our country today, that we must do something rapidly to unite ourselves, and that they believe in us to make the change.