

Sawyer Sands, AK –2021

In this essay, I am tasked to write a reflection about our wonderful speakers and experiences during Washington Week. I could write about the life advice given by Norah O'Donnell and the interview with those on the International Space Station that was, quite literally, out of this world. Alternatively, I might drone on for paragraphs about the one point every speaker agreed on: the inspiring fact they never imagined they would end up where they are now. Or, maybe it is best I focus on the various tours, music productions, and Military Mentors instead. Yet, I believe it would not be enough. Despite all the amazing opportunities I have been afforded, it is my firm belief the true value of the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) is still to come.

USSYP is known for its outstanding lineup of civil servants organized each year; however, it is much more than a Q&A session with people of import. After spending countless hours interacting virtually with my fellow delegates, I have come to an epiphany. The entire program is merely bait to bring together the most dynamic and diverse group of students our country has to offer. From the moment I first met another delegate, I was stunned by their knowledge about not only the country but also the politics of my home district out west in rural Alaska. Beyond the knowledge present within each individual, there are volumes to be spoken about the group's character as a whole. We were able to engage in passionate debate while maintaining our camaraderie, even if it sometimes took a day or two to remember.

After the events of Washington Week, which still seem more of a dream than reality, I cannot help but feel satisfied. Of course, there remains the disappointment I did not get to see Washington, D.C. in person and the myriad of lost opportunities. Nevertheless, I am grateful beyond measure to every force that provided me an opportunity unparalleled anywhere else, the Hearst Foundations foremost among them. Whether virtual or in person, I now know the experience of USSYP can bind even the most radically differentiated beliefs through the strong bonds of mutuality. I believe this quality of the program to be beholden to nothing, not even time itself.

As I sit here writing about what has been and what is, I would like to take a moment and express the true value of USSYP: what will be. One day, I may completely forget the political viewpoints shared by speakers whose names even now begin to haze within my mind. One day, the educational answers I absorbed so readily will blur and be consigned to oblivion in the recesses of memory. One day, the hours spent attentively on Zoom will feel as though they were only a figment of my imagination. Still, when every last remnant of USSYP has left me, I know I will have the companionship of each and every delegate that shared in my experience. A sentimental thought, to be sure, though one that is honest to its core.