

## **Lauren Vance, AL - 2021**

I am a firm believer in the ideal that one can never truly appreciate the value of a moment until it becomes a memory. The same is true for Washington Week; the knowledge I gained, the experiences I had, the friendships formed can never be appreciated enough. In hindsight, the memories created during Washington Week represent priceless value to me, and I am forever grateful for the incredulous experience beheld in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

After receiving an email from my school counselor, I applied on a whim to the program to serve as a United States Senate Youth Program school representative, since at first glance the program seemed honorable and struck an interest within me. Once chosen, I was simply grateful to have the privilege of representing Muscle Shoals High School. Shortly after, I received an email notifying me of my selection as a top ten state semifinalist, and after an intensive interview, I was beyond thrilled and honored to be chosen as an Alabama delegate, in addition to the first delegate ever chosen from my high school. Upon completion of the online Washington Week, I felt a multifaceted sense of excitement and humility from delving so deeply into the realm of public service and gaining firsthand knowledge on the inner workings of our United States government. Going into the program, I was excited to meet the other delegates and was especially looking forward to the noteworthy list of distinguished speakers and guests who would offer an expert vantage point gained from many successful years of civil service.

When reflecting upon Washington Week ONLINE, I feel that it is near impossible to select only a few favorite speakers, but I suppose I will try. As an aspiring medical school student, it was greatly fascinating to me to have the chance to hear from both Dr. Francis Collins and Dr. Anthony Fauci. Their insider knowledge on all things medicinal and pharmaceutical is awe-inspiring, and I can only hope to one day possess a fraction of their immense expertise. It was also hopeful to me to hear that these men, in addition to many other speakers from the program, could never have seen themselves excelling as far as they have now when they were my age, reminding me to make plans for the future but to also embrace the vast opportunity which lies within the unknown. Additionally, I genuinely enjoyed hearing from Ms. Norah O'Donnell, anchor for CBS News. Her classy style and dedication to truth in journalism were appealing to me, and I am thankful that she took time out of her undoubtedly busy schedule to meet with us. Specifically, I enjoyed hearing the ten pieces of life advice that she shared with us - simple steps to take each day to ensure one's positive impact on the world.

It was also a pleasure to have met with one of Alabama's senators, Senator Tommy Tuberville, and to hear his words of wisdom in the area of public service. I understand the compact schedules the Senate runs on, so to have him take a few moments to speak with us meant a lot to myself and my fellow Alabama delegate. Possibly the highest honor of all, however, was hearing President Biden's message to the Class of 2021 delegates. Although the program was virtual, it was still thrilling to hear from the president of the United States, and I am grateful for him to take the time to speak to us and share his advice.

Furthermore, I genuinely enjoyed meeting with my Military Mentor group. My mentor was Captain Tony Starks, and he was extremely personable and willing to offer any help or advice that he could give. He is an exceptional role model and I appreciate his willingness to meet with my fellow mentor group delegates each morning before the program began. I enjoyed being able to make connections with a smaller group of students and their friendships continue to be a blessing to me.

It has genuinely been the honor of a lifetime to have served as a USSYP delegate. Even though the program was required to be held via Zoom due to the ongoing uncertainty of the pandemic, the willingness to adapt and excel even in trying times represents the prevailing sense of dedication to greatness that this program has. The sense of sadness that I felt as I closed my laptop after the closing ceremony of the program illustrates the beyond remarkable experience that I had during my time in the program. In the end, I am eternally grateful to this program and to each and every delegate, staff member, speaker, photographer, and technology admin who played a role in creating this enriching, transformative, and honorable experience. The future lies in the hands of our youth, and I only have the highest of hopes in seeing the exceptional things that the Class of 2021 will accomplish in the future. From the bottom of my heart, thank you to the United States Senate Youth Program.