

Jax Nalley, AR - 2021

When I logged into Washington Week ONLINE 2021, I wasn't sure what exactly to expect. Seated in my family's office, far removed from the nation's capital, I watched on the screen as the seconds counted down to an experience that has since had an indelible impact on my valuation of service, leadership, and my own place in creating positive change. Separated by miles and computer monitors, the collective strength of the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) broke through in a unique yet not-too-different format to truly create an incredible memory that I won't soon forget.

For me, the greatest aspect of our online programming was the access that it provided to a unique slate of speakers and guests. From our first conversation with Captain Scott Kelly, I began to learn lessons like the art of compartmentalizing when confronted with stressful situations. While this skill is doubtless vital to life aboard the Space Station, the perspective that selective focus can provide order in a chaotic world was a novel realization to me. Knowing that I want to provide a framework for positive change to occur through my actions, selective focus is the key to maintaining a sense of direction and purpose while I chart the beginning to my career in policy. It is also a radical idea - the concept that the focus of few individuals can be the basis for reordering our national discourse to make it more equitable for all.

Another important lesson in focus came from President Biden. When he addressed our group, his message on the importance of prioritizing togetherness and cooperation seemed more necessary than ever for a group of young leaders who have come of age in a political climate charged with hostility. I particularly took to heart his challenge that "we must disagree with each other's judgment, but we should never doubt the motive of others." It is far too easy to focus our energy on demonizing those we disagree with, and as idealistic young leaders, our job is to be able to see multiple facets of every issue before synthesizing our own ideas. While we hear from the president often in media and in official communications, hearing from him in a more intimate, personalized setting made his advice seem more tangible as it applies to my own life. The same concept applied when I had the opportunity to ask Senator Tammy Baldwin to describe what she would change in the policy realm if she were granted three genie's wishes. From her living room, she went into depth about her experience being let down by the healthcare system and explained to me why that drives her passion for "baby bonds," a plan to provide financial stability to children starting at birth. It was easy to forget for a moment that the person speaking to me was a member of Congress; talking to her, I felt that the government (and my place in it) were not as distant as I might think.

Speaking with many of my peers, it wasn't hard to imagine the place that they might one day hold in positions of influence. My cohort was full of incredibly accomplished and caring individuals who I was so glad to get to meet - even if I couldn't make as many Zoom calls as I would've liked. I know that one of the most important aspects of USSYP is the connections that it forges between young leaders, and that meshing of young people with fresh ideas has sparked new conversations in my own work. For instance, the work that other delegates have done in student organizing is having a palpable influence in their communities, and I have come away from the program pondering how to make that vision a reality at home. I'm so excited to follow my new friends as many enter college and their lives continue to challenge my own growth.

Although this year the U.S. Senate Youth Program took place without anyone leaving home, I still gained a broad sense of connection with those who joined me in the program. I am so grateful to have grown by asking questions of leaders in the national political realm and by meeting like-minded young people with their own distinctive passions. The experience, I'm sure, will be remembered as a launching-off point for a path that I'll pursue in public service and an impetus to hone my focus on how my impact can positively impact my environment.