

## **Jonas Rosenthal, CO – 2021**

By the time I began the application process for the United States Senate Youth Scholarship Program, I knew it would be online. I never had any doubts that I would not get the full Washington Week experience. I began applying in October 2020, and by that point so much had already been cancelled for me - summer camps and internships, vacations and trips with friends, elections and protests - that I could not work up any emotion about a hypothetical trip to Washington, DC for a scholarship that I didn't think I would win being cancelled. But by the end of the Washington Week, I missed the in-person experience desperately. That was how great the USSYP staff and the Hearst Foundation had done of a job, that a week of Zoom calls and email chains could make me yearn for something I never expected to have.

The week was absolutely jam-packed with activities and meetings, and in retrospect, it almost seems impossible. Looking at one day, for example, I can't imagine meeting the current American astronauts from the International Space Station, Dr. Fauci and Dr. Collins of the National Institutes of Health, the American Ambassador to Brazil and embassy staff, Secretary of State Blinken, and Senator Baldwin of Wisconsin. All in one day! It was a bit like trying to drink from a fire hose - you got knocked down and gamely struggled to your feet again, desperate for more. I started to dream, literally dream at night, about the Zoom calls we were on. I would stay on delegate-organized calls until late into the night talking to people from all over the country and wake up early the next morning to start the next day's session. It was exhausting, but it was magical and extraordinary. I only regret that I couldn't have done it in person and burnt myself out over a week in DC instead of in my attic.

If I had to pick a single moment to encapsulate the crazy week I went through, I think it would be the presentation and questions from and to Senator Lankford of Oklahoma. I don't think anyone would be surprised to learn that many delegates are politically left-of-center to some degree, and on the private delegate discord, the conversation was thick the whole time with strenuous denunciations of every single one of his political positions. But on the Zoom, at the exact same week, the same delegates would respectfully raise their hands, straighten their ties, and ask polite questions designed not to trap him or attack him but genuinely understand his political beliefs and philosophy, or ask advice for entering politics and public service. We were all able to compartmentalize our personal beliefs and become well-behaved delegates for each and every speaker. I think all of us, regardless of our prior expectations and beliefs, learned something from Senator Lankford, and tried very hard to understand him, foreign though he might be. We were, and we are, and we became, a community that represents the diversity of America's youth and a community dedicated to learning from public servants in the hopes that we too, one day, can serve and help in our own way. The United States Senate Youth Program Washington Week Online, hard as it was over Zoom, accomplished that.