

Mohamed Ibrahim, CO – 2021

When I first met and connected with my fellow delegates, I was discouraged by the long list of achievements and resumes my brilliant friends had accumulated throughout their high school career. However, this initial impostor syndrome quickly changed when I had the opportunity to speak with dozens of delegates in our own private Zoom calls. Almost immediately, I gained friends and had deep conversations surrounding contemporary issues in our society.

Despite the experience being held through my computer camera, the first time ever in program history, I had no trouble building lifelong relationships, public service skills, and ways to address political polarization, foreign policy, the global climate crisis, and so much more. During Washington Week, I networked with 103 other delegates, heard from President Joe Biden, Dr. Fauci, CBS News Anchor Norah O' Donnell, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken among many others. However, the greatest part of the program was not the powerful keynote addresses or \$10,000 scholarship but rather the sense of belonging and engagement I had with my other fellow delegates.

Discussions on racial equity, abortion, gun accessibility, and other controversial topics allowed a cohort of 104 people to evolve into an online family that supported, accepted, and progressed no matter the differences in political ideology we expressed. When the program was nearing a close, I wished I would have had the opportunity to engage in person and embrace the American ideals and deep history in Washington, DC that I have always yearned for. One thing that stuck with me were the powerful words of my Military Mentor, Air Force Major Boston McClain. He stressed the importance of networking, 'shooting your shot,' and above all expressing compassion and respect for those around you. My experience at 2021 Washington Week is one that will continue well into my educational career, providing me with invaluable connections, friendships, advice, and so much more. Additionally, it has further helped solidify my interest in public service and engaging my respective communities.

Overall, the Washington Week experience is one that will hold a special place in my heart. Aside from the virtual engagement and tiring days of sitting in a chair, I could not have asked for better, more genuine, or brilliant delegates than the ones I had the honor of engaging in this program with.