

Momona Hadish, DC - 2021

There's a running joke shared among DC residents -- to see how long it takes for the conversation to shift to politics. Often, only a few minutes pass before dinner parties, brunch outings, and short meetups between friends turn to conversations about the latest on-goings of the 1600 Pennsylvania residents, or Congress, or the Senate. Ironically, however, the conversations are cyclical - DC residents live in a bubble of Democrats where it is more likely to get stuck in line at the zoo than it is to find someone who differs from yourself politically. The US Senate Youth Program, however, provided me with an entirely different experience. During my first late night delegate Zoom, I virtually walked into my peers arguing over how to revolutionize America's approach to collecting taxes. Although the discussion of such complex topics at midnight caught me by surprise, it was here that I was introduced to one of the most impactful offerings of the Senate Youth Program -- a community of peers, diverse in political thought, that I would learn and grow from. As the conversation continued, I was mesmerized as my fellow delegates not only debated historical aspects of fiscal policy but began to propose their own designs of an ideal tax system (with inside jokes scattered throughout). Intimidated, I hesitated to unmute myself but eventually gathered the courage to challenge the ideas presented. Almost every night leading up to Washington Week, these delegate Zooms continued -- we debated, shared stories, and played games until our eyelids grew too heavy to open.

To begin our Washington Week, we watched our state roll call videos (similar to that of a voting roll call video, which I am sure I'll see my fellow delegates in in the coming years). As I saw mountains, beaches, and State Capitol buildings flash across the screen, I was in awe of how passionately my fellow delegates represented their states and interests. I was proud of the opportunity to share our culture with the program during the DC segment of the video. I was able to introduce Go-Go music and other DC treasures to my co-delegates as I stood in front of the Washington Monument. A common thread throughout the roll call video and Washington Week in its entirety was identity: not only was I able to bring my identities and the communities I am a part of to the United States Senate Youth Program, but my experience was shaped by that of others. When I had the honor of introducing and hearing from Norah O'Donnell, I was fascinated by her dedication to finding and sharing truth with the country. But above all, I was captivated by how she paves the road for her female peers to do the same -- she continues to use her identity as a force for change. Inspired, I incorporated my identity in the dialogues I engaged in and the questions I asked our speakers. Most notably, I incorporated my ethnic background into a question I posed to Jalina Porter, Principal Deputy Spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State, about the role that the United States should have in preventing genocide, honing in on the genocide currently occurring in Tigray.

In a community as politically diverse as the United States Senate Youth Program, I am grateful of how welcomed our identities were, as identity often serves as the foundation for political thought. Through discussions about politics, economy, and identity with government leaders, Military Mentors, and my fellow delegates, I was able to gain perspectives that aren't as represented in my DC bubble. Specifically, as the head delegate of my high school Model United Nations club and a general foreign affairs enthusiast, I was excited and humbled to learn from leaders in international relations about diplomacy and American interests. The conversations I had during Washington Week and those I am sure to have as a Senate Youth alumna will have an everlasting impact on my career and personal growth. My deepest thanks and gratitude go towards the Hearst Foundations staff who were dedicated to ensuring we experienced a fulfilling and educational Washington Week. I am very appreciative of the touching experiences I have gained through the Senate Youth Program which is credit to your commitment to creating a more just and educated world. Finally, this reflection would be incomplete without giving my special thanks to my fellow delegates and the Progressive Caucus, I will always cherish the conversations and laughs we shared during Washington Week. I am excited to grow our friendships and see all the positive changes you'll continue to make in this world!