

Faith Townsend, GA – 2021

My entire life, I've either been into politics "the wrong way" or I've been "too inexperienced and young" to know what beliefs I *really* have and why I believe them. All those reactions are the result of misunderstanding, bigotry, and dogmatism; they're as difficult to deprogram as the patriarchal constructs that I struggle to recognize in my own thought processes. I'm still teaching myself to respect my own beliefs, and regardless of your station in life, I hope you start or continue to work towards the same goal yourself. Representing Georgia during the 2021 Washington Week Online has proven itself a landmark in my journey of finding that (mostly political) self love.

Senate Youth delegates and alumni exemplify what it means to be respectful, intelligent, and *meaningfully* outspoken. I'm thankful that I have access to a network of young public servants that are thoughtful with their words and actions; they are my forever friends and will grow up to be amazing assets to America, or whatever country they make their home. I am especially grateful that they were along my side during Washington Week ONLINE because they helped me process the insurmountable wisdom I gained. The synthesis of all the lessons I learned is one main thing, more important than all else: The definition of public service is endlessly diverse. It is not being a senator, and it is not being an astronaut (no offense to senators and astronauts). Public service is nothing more than being a *good* person with *pure* intentions while serving the public. Hearing all the speakers reinforced that belief because almost none of them held the same title, and those who did such as Senator James Lankford and Senator Tammy Baldwin were vastly different. The stark contrast between the titles and backgrounds of the speakers proved there is no strict place I have to fit into. If I get the privilege to be a senator one day, I don't have to be one that conforms to American precedent. I just have to be a senator. Public servants just have to exist as good, pure servants, not in a certain way or manner that was chosen for them.

Before experiencing Washington Week Online, I was set on being an officer in the United States Navy. Don't get me wrong, that's still my intent and I'm still set on it, but my epiphany about what a public servant truly is changed the way I see opportunity. I no longer see naval service as "the most direct and predestined (for me) route of service." It's just a catalyst for what I can do before, during, and after military service. I can do so much more than be an officer during my one grand life. Lots of federal leaders are veterans, and nothing is holding me back from filling their footsteps. All epiphanies accounted for, one other thing I have learned is this: The last day I have to do something new, to serve or love in a new way, is my last one alive. I plan to use every day until then to its fullest, and I hope you do the same.

Finally, I dread the idea of choosing a "favorite speaker," but I'll submit to choosing favorite lessons provided by them. Norah O'Donnell from CBS taught me the power of being headstrong and sure of self. I was raised to be reserved with my thoughts, especially if they may provoke undesirable reactions or responses from others. That's not the way to live; it's important to be truthful and (mostly) unbiased in what you say, but it's just as important that you have the courage to say it. In good intentions, such as exposing the truth, there is value regardless of outcome, especially if you get the answers to your questions. Similarly, Justice Clarence Thomas reassured me of the value that being true to self holds amongst pressures that you're supposed to act or believe a certain way because of your identity, creed, or background. While his lesson differed slightly from Norah O'Donnell's, the message was all too similar: Nobody is going to be you *for* you, and you do not have to become what you were "supposed to be". You were not predestined to be anything or anyone. The speakers taught me to be unapologetic of my existence, to live all the lives I can in the one I have, and to have integrity in all that I do.