

Ashley Valois, HI – 2021

The loud crows of the rooster wake me in the morning. My day usually starts with looking through my emails; they guide how I construct my to-do list for that day. It was February 6, 2021, at around 9 AM. I stumbled upon an email that was titled: “USSYP Congratulations! Important Delegate Information.” In disbelief, I rubbed my eyes to reread the message one more time. I jumped out of bed and immediately ran to my parents, who were eating breakfast. Eggs and spam were on the menu on that bright and beautiful day. I read the message aloud to them, and its meaning didn’t quite register with them, either — it took two more tries to reread and verify that it was not a mistake. My mother humorously asked me if it was a scam. Entertaining this idea, I emailed Ms. Lynn DeSmet and jokingly asked her, “Is this real?” Thankfully, our humor transcended over the Pacific Ocean, and she replied, “Yes, it is.”

I did have my doubts about an online experience. Like many other delegates who already had trips and opportunities halted by the COVID-19 pandemic, I was saddened at the fact that I would not be able to experience Washington Week to the fullest. Nonetheless, I dove into whatever I could get out of Zoom and Discord chats. I joined the Facebook Group and the Discord; I was heavily intimidated by the other delegates’ achievements. Then, I found out they were conducting delegate-run Zoom meetings. There was a sinking feeling in my stomach when I joined my first Zoom. I prepared myself for political debates, and my peers did not disappoint. There were back and forth arguments surrounding the dairy industry and whether the milk or cereal comes first. I was one of the quieter delegates. When I introduced myself and revealed that I was one of the delegates from Hawai‘i, I was enamored by their excitement and my heart felt a bit lighter. I’ve never met a group of people who can have a heated policy debate, and a few seconds later, all collectively agree that Max’s music room should be registered as a national treasure. After weeks of constant battles with time zones due to late-night discussions with the other delegates, the actual test of Washington Week came.

On Saturday night, I pledged to sleep at around 7 PM so that I could wake up in time for the very first day of Washington Week. I ended up sleeping at around 8:30 PM, my heartbeat rang in my ears, and I could only feel the sweat accumulating in my hands. I woke up at 3 AM the following morning, grabbed my cup of coffee, and prepared myself for the schedule that was in front of me. We were well equipped with the guidance of Ms. Rayne Guilford, Ms. Lynn DeSmet, and the other staff at the Hearst Foundations, who made all of this possible. Our delegate orientation was done. With racing hearts and various Zoom backgrounds, we began our journey as United States Senate Youth Program delegates. Although Washington Week only lasted from Sunday to Thursday, the time between felt like a lifetime. The wisdom I gained from the delegates and distinguished guests cannot be measured by the words I write in this essay.

Just as Captain Scott Kelly said, “The sky is not the limit,” the wisdom we retained from the distinguished guests we’ve met and talked to are only measurable by the boundaries of the universe. Judge Robert H. Henry reminded us that “We have paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology,” a reminder of the ever-changing day we currently live in. Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed reassured us that “All history is revisionist history.” Our

perception of what we think happened could have been the tip of the iceberg. We must “look at the past with a new set of eyes” and envision our futures with the past lessons. I’ve never imagined International Space Station astronauts would answer my pressing question: their favorite foods. While eating in space seemed to be a journey in itself, they had a dilemma of picking a favorite food. Dr. Francis Collins was a true testament to the saying that life will not go as you plan. Yet, he has achieved so much in his lifetime, even if the road wasn’t always straightforward. The “Fauci effect” had the 104 delegates in awe and excited to meet Dr. Anthony Fauci. He reminded us that “It is important that you get excited to do whatever you want to do, not what gets other people excited.” We must learn to live for ourselves and pursue our passions. Ms. Norah O’Donnell, the anchor on CBS Evening News, was assertive and confident demeanor left me in a daze for the rest of the day. She spoke so eloquently, and she connected to all of us instantly. She consistently brought up the importance of journalism in politics; there is power in information and weakness in ignorance. Lastly, White House Climate Advisor Ms. Gina McCarthy’s enthusiasm regarding my question on indigenous people’s sustainability development and goals still makes my heart race. She had an overwhelming passion for indigenous people’s rights and praised my raising this issue. Most of all, she commended Hawaii’s developments in achieving a greener future.

I will stick to my statement that our mentor group, which Lieutenant Commander Robert Concepcion spearheaded, was the best. The night before Washington Week, we all got to look at our mentor groups. I entered Washington Week only speaking to a few delegates in my group, and I ended it with friendships from all over the United States. Alainn, Anna, Chris, Jacob, Jamaal, Nyche, Olivia, Sid, and Xuechen are some of the most accomplished people I have ever met. Yet, they remain the calmest and most collected group of people I have interacted with. At the end of every day, we were able to debate and express our opinions in an environment that encouraged discussion. This was only done through the help of Lieutenant Commander Concepcion. He is someone who always answers your questions, laughs at your jokes that may not be as funny as you think, and sends out excellent book recommendations. I felt grateful whenever he brought up the time zone difference; it was always a good start to every conversation.

Most of all, I will forever be thankful for the friendships that were born through the USSYP. When I talked to USSYP alumni from our school, she recounted the friends she made through this program and how she still converses with them to this day. Although our Washington Week experience was not what we hoped for, the bonds we formed were exemplified through the daily Zoom meetings, USSYP meme page, and Discord banter. Even if internet connections were sometimes an enemy, the connections we shared were as strong as ever. Last but not least, USSYP brought together the Progressive Caucus, a group of now-close friends who will cheer for your successes (even the small ones), criticize your sleeping schedule, and are some of the best peer editors you will ever meet. I’m excited to see the 2021 USSYP delegates venture into their future endeavors and am excited for the changes they will support and begin. I do not doubt in my mind that wherever we end up, we will be proud of what we’ve done and who we’ve become.