

Jillian Manternach, IA - 2021

The United States Senate Youth Program's (USSYP) Washington Week was truly a transformative experience. Although we were unable to meet in person this year due to COVID-19, the dedication and immense planning that went into creating Washington Week online done by the USSYP staff gave my delegates and I a way to meet and interact with each other and government officials without risking our safety. The daily conversations in the group chat and nightly Zooms with my fellow delegates leading up to Washington Week not only calmed my nerves but introduced me to some amazing people.

By the time the virtual week came around, I felt comfortable with my other delegates and extremely excited to learn more about our nation's government and the people who help run it. While all of the speakers were incredible and super interesting, my favorite had to be Brian Kamoie, the DHS Distinguished Chair of Leadership. He started off by asking us "What is it that you plan to do with your wild and precious life?" As a teen who still has no clue what she wants to do with her future, that question constantly stresses me out. However, rather than dropping a bunch of career paths we could pursue, he gave us three rules to live by. These rules were commit to serve the greater good, think BIG, and take bold action and be an ethical leader. His advice along with his enthusiasm and anecdotes has honestly inspired me to become a more confident and ethical person. Mr. Kamoie has taught me that I need to have passion and strength when addressing issues and the importance of being among the people helping to solve them. Lastly, Mr. Kamoie taught me to have the confidence and courage to do what others are not, especially if that courage includes eating a donut set out by Chief Justice Roberts before an interview.

While Mr. Kamoie's keynote address may have been the one that resonated with me the most, I learned something new about life from everyone I talked to, including my Military Mentor and fellow delegates. Without the amazing Captain Teri Boivin as my mentor, my Washington Week experience would not have been the same. Listening to her stories about her life as a woman in the Air Force was really inspiring and led to many interesting and educational discussions in our mentor group meetings. Of course, those discussions would not have been possible without the other delegates in my group. Every single one of them were amazingly smart and talented. They constantly brought up new ideas and thoughts that I never thought of or sparked new topics of debate. I know that each and every one of them will go on to do amazing things.

In the end, I know that USSYP and the experiences it has given me has genuinely changed my life. Not only has it changed the way I view public service and politics, but it has made me excited for my future and what I can accomplish. I am incredibly thankful to everyone who helped to plan the United States Senate Youth Program, as well as the contributions of the Hearst Foundations for making this week possible and giving me this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Lastly, I would like to give one final thanks to my fellow delegates and mentors for being so supportive and constantly teaching me new things. I cannot wait to see how you all will change the world.