

Thomas Musgrave, IL – 2021

Throughout generations of Americans, few, if any, would identify the most impactful and transformative experience of their lives as being a Zoom call. However, I have this distinct and unique honor, along with 103 of my peers, as a delegate of the 2021 United States Senate Youth Program. I could have never imagined speaking with Norah O'Donnell, Dr. Anthony Fauci, or my senators from Illinois, but through the generosity of the Hearst Foundations and the commitment of the staff of the United States Senate Youth Program, these unimaginable experiences became an impactful reality. I cannot be more grateful for this opportunity.

Before entering the program, I, like my other fellow delegates, had a strong interest in politics and public service. However, being able to speak directly to political officials shifted this interest into a passion, inspiring me to move forward into a change-inducing career with advice from those who have achieved one. Hearing of Ambassador Todd Chapman's experience in foreign service, Gina McCarthy's passion and knowledge for the environment and climate, Betty Koed's experience documenting the history of the Senate, and Noah Harris's experience as an alumni of USSYP helped me understand the importance of passion, service, and humility in your work. Public service seemed not only important, but also attainable if I was as passionate as these speakers. These sentiments will undoubtedly bring me inspiration as I begin shaping my own political journey.

Perhaps the most impactful memories of this program will come from the interaction with my fellow delegates. Being a part of a group of 104 politically minded, civically engaged, and inspiringly passionate individuals is truly a once in a lifetime opportunity. Each delegate, coming from different geographical, religious, economic, and personal backgrounds, helped build my perspective and understanding of America as a whole; coming from a small suburb in Illinois, this was a new and transformative experience. As each speaker explained their experiences, the reactions of other delegates helped me understand the diverse impacts of political officials' actions, words, and thoughts on students across the nation. This newfound knowledge will help me bring back the experiences of USSYP to my own high school and community, making an effective impact on those around me.

It is undoubtable that participating in Washington Week is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Each official was actively working to inspire a new generation of public servants to take their places in the future. Their enthusiasm and passion for speaking with young leaders taught me a key lesson; if my work does not inspire others, then maybe I am not doing it right. Considering the impacts these speakers had on me, I am personally inspired to spread their sentiments and passions with those around me, in hopes of creating similar impacts on others.

To future delegates, take advantage of each moment. Fill your journals with quotes, thoughts, and autographs from speakers and fellow delegates to come back to later. Allow yourself to learn, to be inspired, or to potentially have a change in perspective; I certainly left Washington Week with new philosophies, beliefs, and political values. To those at the Hearst Foundations and our "distinguished guests," thank you for your everlasting support for such an impactful program. And to my fellow delegates, I hope to see one (or maybe a whole Cabinet) of you in the Oval Office someday. You've got my vote.