

## Yvin Shin, IL – 2021

Before the United States Senate Youth Program, I had followed the careers of the very individuals who spoke to us at this year's Washington Week. I watched the masterful interviews conducted by CBS anchor Norah O'Donnell, analyzed the opinions of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, and read news profiles of National Climate Adviser Gina McCarthy. Yet, what I knew of them remained intrinsically superficial, tempered by the distance that inevitably exists between such high-profile individuals and the public. Washington Week gave me the rare opportunity to close that distance. Our speakers did not recite interview answers or stump speeches—rather, they gave us candid, oftentimes vulnerable, answers brimming with wisdom and insight.

The high-profile Norah O'Donnell shared with us advice and aphorisms collected over a lifetime of integral journalism, from the importance of sending handwritten thank-you notes to the simple phrase, "Survival is underrated." I learned first-hand the techniques behind the very interviews that taught my younger self deft eloquence and nuance. The famously reserved Justice Thomas spoke with startling frankness on the development of his ideals and shared with us the necessity of choosing the road less taken. Ms. McCarthy's casual, conversational sincerity couldn't mask her passion and brilliance. In the span of an hour, she had completely redefined my view of climate change and public service.

"That's the brilliance of public service, because it's not about you deciding the path forward," she said. "It's about you listening and always remembering that the path forward is going to be defined by the people that you're trying to serve."

As soon as I heard those words, I knew they would stay with me for a lifetime.

Some of my most meaningful conversations, however, happened outside of the speaker sessions. My Military Mentor group undoubtedly became the most valuable part of my week. Our mentor, a major in the Air Force, modeled for us diligence, respect, and how to navigate difficult conversations. He shared with us his 7-day rule in forming relationships, affirmed that we always deserved to be in the room, and revealed to us his path to joining the military. Everyone in his group could recite his favorite piece of advice by the end of the week: "Shoot your shot. Make them tell you no." I had never personally known a member of the military before him, and cherished his anecdotes about his time in service, family, and plans for the future. Not only did they always contain a lesson, but also gave me a valuable, humanizing perspective on one of the United States' largest institutions.

Our group check-ins soon expanded into hours-long conversations as we discussed topics including religion, the military, and imperialism. The 11 delegates present brought 11 different perspectives, grounded in 11 different backgrounds of various races, religions, and genders. But our conversations never grew hostile or combative. They rested on a foundation of mutual respect, and never interfered with our jokes, celebrations of college acceptances, and ultimate friendship.

Washington Week may have ended, but its impact—close relationships with unbelievably intelligent students who will be our nation's next leaders, intimate insight from high-profile officials, and ultimately, reinvigorated faith in public service—will never dissipate. I'm currently listening to a Spotify playlist a fellow delegate made for me. I have a standing invitation to fly with one of my Military Mentor group-mates once she becomes a pilot, and plan to keep my college dorm doors open for when the USSYP Class of 2021 visits New York. I still have my blue moleskin notebook filled to the brim with quotes from senators, diplomats, and chief medical advisors that, even today, ring in my ears. So, to my "delegates and distinguished guests,"

Thank you.