

Katherine LaReau, IN-2021

A week before the 2021 Washington Week ONLINE program commenced, a box arrived on the front doorstep of my house with my name on it. I excitedly opened the box to find lots of Washington Week “swag” to prepare me for the week to come: reading material about the program and our nation’s government, a mini red copy of George Washington’s *Rules of Civility* book with advice on how to conduct myself “in company and conversation,” an official badge that would have granted me access into some of the nation’s most secure buildings had the program been in person, and some fuel for the week in the form of a white chocolate replica of the Capitol Building and chocolate covered cookies engraved with images of national monuments. The item in the box that would get the most use, however, was the navy-blue moleskin *United States Senate Youth Program* notebook. This notebook is now filled with insights and quotes from some of the brightest minds in our nation’s government, nuggets of advice from my military mentor, reflections on conversations with my fellow delegates, and a special note-to-self that I will delve into later. Allow me to share some of the content of that skinny blue journal.

I began each morning of Washington Week by flipping to a new page and writing out the agenda for the day - an agenda filled with big, exciting names including former NASA astronaut Scott Kelly, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, CBS News Anchor Norah O’Donnell, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and President Joe Biden. As I listened to these speakers share their life experiences, provide insider insight into the United States government, and offer their career advice, I found that my pen could not keep up!

One of the highlights of the week for me was when I was given the opportunity to ask a question of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. My notebook is filled with notes from our session with Justice Thomas, but I especially appreciated his response to one of the delegates about the qualities he looks for when hiring law clerks. Among other things he said, “I like young people who treat others well. Just because you are upset about something does not give you the license to treat others unkindly.” Well said, Justice Thomas!

My favorite speaker of Washington Week was CBS news anchor Norah O’Donnell. She began her talk by sharing a quote from Walter Cronkite, a newsman once regarded as “the most trusted man in America.” In my notebook, I wrote down his words, “Journalism is what we need to make democracy work.” As Ms. O’Donnell shared her experiences interviewing United States presidents, changemakers like Malala Yousafzai and controversial leaders like the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, I realized the veracity of this quote and the importance of media rooted in truth and integrity.

Several pages of my navy-blue moleskin are filled with advice from my military mentor, Major Boston McClain of the United States Air Force. A couple days into the program, my Military Mentor group discovered that Major McClain was working on a 50-page capstone essay for his master’s degree that was due two days after the conclusion of Washington Week. Major McClain was going to bed after 12 am and waking up before 5 am in the morning to work on his paper so he could be fully present with our group during the program. His selflessness was admirable, and it was an honor to get to know and learn from a man of such great character. One of his words of advice to our group was, “Shoot your shot! Don’t stop until you hear ‘no.’” He encouraged us to reach for the stars and to not hesitate to reach for opportunities even if we think we will get shot down. The worst that can happen is we hear the word ‘no.’ The final words of encouragement from Major McClain in my notebook say, “You deserve to be in the room. Never sell yourself short.”

Alongside the advice from Major McClain, my blue moleskin also contains reflections on some of the discussions that took place with my fellow delegates in our Military Mentor Zoom. I did not anticipate that I would grow so close with a group of people in just a few short days, especially in a virtual format. However, the relationships forged in Major McClain's zoom room will last a lifetime, and I cannot wait to meet my fellow delegates in person. The views of my military mentor group spanned the entire political spectrum. In our Zoom room, we had Christians, a Muslim, a couple atheists, and I am a Catholic. The current political climate and polarization in our nation would suggest that people with such varying views cannot respectfully engage in a civil discussion about these topics. But my military mentor group proved that paradigm wrong. The 12 of us engaged in some of the most fruitful conversations I have ever had about politics and religion. I made sure to reflect on these productive discussions so that when I flip through my notebook in the future, I will be reminded that civility is not only possible, it is necessary and beautiful.

One unique reason this week will live in my memory forever is because I received some life-changing news during one of our sessions. I was on a Zoom call with Dr. Kathleen Hicks, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, when my mom walked into the room with tears in her eyes. She pointed at the phone and said, "It's West Point. You got in!" Over the last year or so, my desire to serve our country and attend the United States Military Academy at West Point has turned into my single greatest goal in life. I am proud to say that goal will soon be accomplished. I will forever remember the day I heard the news, and my reaction is documented in my moleskin notebook. Sandwiched between two bullet points about China and the US's military allies is a note-to-self: "I just got into West Point!". After participating in the United States Senate Youth Program, I have a newfound appreciation for our democracy, and I am newly invigorated to spend the next decade of my life dedicated to its service.

Thirty-two pages of my navy-blue moleskin notebook are filled front and back with notes from my time during Washington Week, but more than half of its pages are still blank. However, I am confident those pages won't stay blank forever. I was in a Zoom room this past week with future senators, ambassadors, governors, CEOs, astronauts, and perhaps even a future president of the United States. I will continue to write and reflect in my moleskin as I meet with and continue to develop friendships with my fellow USSYP delegates and alumni - a network of people devoted to making this world a better place.