

Alex Young, KY – 2021

Firm in his convictions and ideologies, yet relaxed and confident in manner, Associate Justice Clarence Thomas addressed 104 wide-eyed delegates from across the nation as they scribbled down every thought shared, in hopes of not missing a single tidbit of wisdom. In his remarks, Justice Thomas quoted Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." He spoke of the poem's wisdom and his belief in the value of taking the road less traveled. The theme of the road less traveled rang true for my experience in the United States Senate Youth Program, and for each delegate, as we experienced a transformational week unparalleled to any other previous opportunity.

When I first learned of my selection for the United States Senate Youth Program I was thrilled but also cautiously optimistic, knowing that the conference would be in an online setting. As I scrolled through pictures of previous Washington Weeks, I began to worry that our experience wouldn't be comparable to the usual in-person experience. I, thankfully, was very much wrong in my presumptions. Washington Week ONLINE completely changed my life through the experiences granted and the connections made.

Over the course of Washington Week, we had the utter privilege of hearing from inspirational scientific, legal, and political figures. On the first day of Washington Week, it was an honor to hear from astronaut Captain Scott Kelly. Captain Kelly's story was truly motivating. Kelly shared with us that he actually failed his first Naval landing test, but he decided to put his military career on the line and attempt the test again. On his second try, Kelly succeeded. His success changed the trajectory of his career and allowed him future opportunities. His story serves as an impactful reminder to take risks in life.

We also had the distinct honor of hearing from two individuals leading the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. This unique experience gave us the opportunity to discuss the nation's response to the pandemic and how decisions impact the entirety of the country. It was reassuring to hear from the leading scientists at the NIH, Dr. Francis Collins and Dr. Anthony Fauci. The United States Senate Youth Program provided the opportunity to connect with leaders on extremely prevalent issues. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to speak directly with the leaders of America's response to the challenge of our time.

During Washington Week we also had the privilege to hear from Ms. Norah O'Donnell, the lead CBS Evening News anchor. Ms. O'Donnell provided insightful and practical advice on how to approach work and life. She shared the difficult experiences she has faced in her roles and spoke of the necessity of a free press to democracy. Ms. O'Donnell's practical advice, from being well read to asking the right questions, will serve as guidance in school and in future career decisions. Her reminder of the difference between affirmation and information was also impactful. It is easy to propagate confirmation bias and divisiveness, but in order for democracy to prevail, the truth must come first.

I will never forget the ripe and insightful remarks from the wide variety of speakers we heard from during Washington Week. Hearing from powerful federal leaders of different perspectives and beliefs was an amazing honor. It was also a tremendous experience to bond with students of different views from across the nation. I made strong connections and friendships, in just the span of a week, which will last a lifetime. My fellow delegates are not only the leaders of tomorrow but also the leaders of today.

Representing the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the nation in the United States Senate Youth Program was a humbling experience. As I continue to lead and serve in different roles for our Commonwealth and nation, I am certain I will use the knowledge gained from Washington Week to build a better tomorrow.