

Audrey Mann, LA - 2021

From a worldwide quarantine to major social movements to a presidential election and an attempted coup, the past pandemic year has been full of surprises and increasingly unique life experiences. Even with all these events happening around the world, I thought that transitioning from the anticipation of junior year to a senior year of college applications and school assignments would be the only major learning opportunity I would have while stuck at home in Zoom school. That was until I was granted the privilege of representing Louisiana as one of the two 2021 delegates in the United States Senate Youth Program.

I have been interested in politics and current events for as long as I can remember, but meeting the other 103 delegates opened my eyes to an entirely different breed of political knowledge and action that could be achieved as a high schooler. Thankfully, I did not have to anxiously wait until Washington Week to have debates with my fellow delegates and learn all about their amazing accomplishments. Instead, through Discord, Instagram, Zoom, and Facebook, I quickly became immersed in a community of the most impressive and knowledgeable group of teenagers I have ever met. Intense discussions on economic policy and socialist versus capitalist ideology intermixed with debates on if the cereal goes before the milk and which states actually constitute "The South." As much as I would have liked to meet everyone in person, interacting online before, during, and after the program has allowed us to remain in contact without any odd transition back into what I might have considered life outside of the Senate Youth Program. We've been able to easily contact and converse with each other since February, and I honestly can't imagine those conversations ending any time soon.

Because of the online delegate meetings outside of the official program, the learning experiences began a month ahead of the actual Washington Week. By the time, March 14th rolled around, I had already gained a plethora of new information on politics, government, philosophy, world affairs, economics, and so much more that I almost didn't believe I could learn much else. I was definitely mistaken, as the Washington Week program, even in an online format, was amazingly informative. Speakers from many areas of the U.S. government and related professions spoke about everything from policy to life and career advice. Norah O'Donnell, the anchor and managing editor of CBS News, was possibly the most well-spoken speaker of the week. She clearly put to use her skills as a public speaker as she answered hard-hitting questions and shared wise words with all the delegates. Wisconsin Senator Tammy Baldwin's genuine passion for her job and infectious personality provided for one of the most memorable conversations. Given the amount of delegates with the limited amount of time for each session, questions were not guaranteed. When I had the privilege of asking Senator Baldwin about her education and how it related to her career, her ability to convey true enthusiasm for her position while still directly answering the question gave me a real sense of how she approached her responsibilities as a representative within the U.S. government. Ms. O'Donnell and Senator Baldwin were only two of many influential speakers. Justice Clarence Thomas, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Ms. Gina McCarthy, and Dr. Betty Koed, among others, contributed to an experience that I will never forget.

Hearing from the distinguished speakers about how many of their life plans did not begin on the path to where they ended up was one of the more surprisingly consistent anecdotes. But, what it helped me realize was that what allowed those speakers to get to where they are in life, and where I want to get, was their ability to take the chances that were given to them. Dr. Fauci and Dr. Collins both shared similar tales about their rise to the National Institutes of Health. They hadn't intended to go there specifically, but as they gained experience and opportunities arose, they took them. Beyond the political knowledge I've obtained from the speakers; my wonderful Military Mentor, Captain Molly Baker; the Senate Youth staff; and my amazing co-delegates, I've learned more about life in general than I ever expected to. Taking the advice of several speakers and Senate Youth alumni, I can't plan exactly for the future, but I can continue to take advantage of the opportunities that are available to me. The 2021 United States Senate Youth Program was the first of many profound experiences in my life that will hopefully help me find that unexpected path.