

Iann Leigh, ME - 2021

On the week of March 14th, 2021, I had the pleasure of participating in the first ever online Washington Week, through the United States Senate Youth Program. Although the Senate Youth Program was hosted virtually, instead of in Washington, DC as it usually is, I feel that I received an incredible benefit and learning experience that rivals that of any other experience I have had the opportunity to participate in. I greatly appreciated all of the speakers and guests who addressed the delegates, but there were a few who stood out from the crowd, even among a group of such distinguished guests. Of those who spoke during Washington Week, I personally found Climate Advisor Ms. Gina McCarthy and Senator James Lankford to be the most engaging. Ms. McCarthy spoke with vigor and passion about her area of expertise, and her own journey of perseverance was inspiring, as it brought her from local advocacy work to working alongside the President of the United States. Although Ms. McCarthy's view does not align directly with my own, the commitment with which she executes her job and her empathy for her fellow world citizens provided me with a bright and hopeful glimpse into the Biden administration. As for Senator Lankford, I was impressed with his erudition and his ability to articulate his beliefs. He spoke about his position on many issues that I feel similarly about, and his responses to questions prompted me to think about how I can communicate my similar beliefs as effectively as he did.

I also immensely enjoyed the chance to meet with Senator Collins and Senator King, who shared some valuable pieces of wisdom from their years in public service with my co-delegate and I that I believe will stick with me for a long while. The sessions with my Military Mentor were enlightening, as I had never before had a chance to speak with high-ranking military personnel before. My mentor provided insights into military career opportunities and into the rewarding work that soldiers, airmen, and sailors participate in. Captain Chris Meyer was kind enough to speak with each delegate in my Military Mentor Group both one-on-one and in a group setting, which led to fruitful conversations between the delegates themselves and with Captain Meyer. As someone who hopes to serve in the armed forces in the near future, Captain Meyer's direct experience in the service was particularly enriching. While I had a conceptual understanding of the work that the United States military performs, my mentor's expertise was able to provide me with an enhanced conceptualization of the impact that an individual can have while serving in the military. The Military Mentor sessions before and after each busy day of events helped to place the whirlwind of information in context by allowing me to hear the impact and ideas that my fellow delegates had received. I made friends with everyone in my group, and I plan to extend the immense benefits that I received from my week with the United States Senate Youth Program into the future by staying in contact with Captain Meyer and my fellow delegates.

For a teenager from Maine who had never before interacted with individuals from the federal government, Washington Week was an extremely formative and rewarding experience. I was incredibly impressed by each staff member I had the pleasure of meeting, from Jakub, the photographer, to Ms. Caroline Berver, who ensured that my entire online experience ran as best as it possibly could, to Mr. Steve Cox, the Director of Student Activities who brought a lively and engaging moderation to each session of the 2021 United States Senate Youth Program. Everyone I met during the United States Senate Youth Program was of the highest caliber, and possessed incredible intellect. I enjoyed getting to know all of my fellow delegates, and while the camaraderie is doubtlessly easier to develop in person, we all found ourselves laughing and becoming friends through the multiple online opportunities that were specifically for this purpose. It was humbling to meet 103 of the brightest high schoolers from around the country, and I will not forget what I learned from them anytime soon. From hearing about cultural practices in states very different from my own, to learning about the other delegates' interests, passions, and service work, I found myself perpetually in awe of the beautiful diversity that defines the United States of America, and the United States Senate Youth Program.