

Kenneth Gu, MI — 2021

As I skim through my notes, I know that I will never be able to truly convey my awe for this incredibly transformative, humbling, and inspiring experience. From the small chats between nervous yet excited delegates to conversations with the elected and appointed officials making decisions for this entire country, Washington Week has provided me with not only a deeper understanding of and respect for public service and our government's structure but also a strong hope for a better future forged by the brilliant 103 delegates that surrounded me on Zoom each day.

I will never forget hearing from speakers like Senator Baldwin and Dr. Collins who shared stories from their backgrounds and taught us how personal experiences are what create great leaders. Other speakers like Ms. O'Donnell and Captain Kelly kept us in awe with their ability to communicate in a way that captivated audiences. In every session, the brilliant and accomplished speakers welcomed us to their personal and professional lives, answered our varied and sometimes difficult questions, and left us with advice and lessons that will last a lifetime.

Although our speakers spanned the political spectrum, came from different parts of the country, and worked in different branches and fields, certain themes arose in various sessions. We heard about the importance of intersectionality in various fields, the value that public service can provide to both a society and to an individual, and the search for the truth through the fourth estate and other sources. We heard about history that is often unheard, the ethical challenges associated with different areas, and learning from mistakes and the past. Through all of this, speakers shared lessons that they had learned through experience and public service: staying flexible and open to new opportunities, learning to take risks, asking the *big* questions, and many other barely legible lessons that were quickly scribbled into my notes.

While the pandemic might have taken away certain aspects of this year's Washington Week experience, it certainly added new experiences to our Washington Week journey and brought delegates closer together. I remember joining our delegate voice chat a few days after being selected, and while the "join call" button looked daunting at first, by the end of that first night, I was fighting the urge to sacrifice sleep to stay on calls with other delegates. Every topic we discussed—politics or otherwise—brought out true talent and passion from delegates. The knowledge that delegates had on every issue and topic discussed was hard to believe at first, but as I got to know the other delegates and their unbelievable backgrounds and experiences, the nonchalant displays of brilliance became no less impressive but more and more believable.

Of course, this reflection would not be complete without mentioning the people behind the scenes who made this entire experience possible. The selection committees from each state, the entire USSYP team with Ms. Guilford, those who helped provide tech help, those who we likely never met, Mr. Cox and his unforgettable "delegates and distinguished guests" phrase, Mr. and Mrs. Mosur, and the amazing Military Mentors created the best possible program, and I will always be infinitely grateful to all of them, the Hearst Foundations, and Senate Resolution 324 for this experience.

When I think back on all of the moments that we shared together, my experiences with my Military Mentor group will always stand out. The discussions we had about different speakers and our own experiences added remarkable value to the overall lessons and program, and through his facilitation of our discussions and interactions with all of us, Major Richard Hanrahan exemplified leadership and set an example for our entire group.

During our very last Military Mentor group debrief, we discussed our own backgrounds and heritage, reflecting on our individual differences and our shared experiences. To me, this poetic ending to a life-changing program best captured the essence of the U.S. Senate Youth Program: our belief that service can create a better future, better union, and better world brought and bound us together, but our differences in backgrounds and experiences do not divide us; instead, they provide a broader perspective and are meaningful tools for creating meaningful change.