

Naina Agrawal-Hardin, MI - 2021

This year's Washington Week seemed, at first, to be a total departure from tradition. On our first day of programming, rather than stepping through the doors of the Mayflower Hotel, I settled into a corner of my family's living room with my laptop. I may or may not have been wearing sweatpants underneath my polka dot blouse and blazer. After a full year of virtual everything—classes, clubs, birthday parties, and more—I was surprised to feel nervous about what lay ahead of me: a fully online United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) experience, complete with a remote tour of Mount Vernon and designated delegate hang-out Zooms in the evenings.

However, I soon realized that some traditions were alive and well. In advance of Washington Week, each of the 104 delegates had received a large box filled with blue confetti and USSYP paraphernalia: a leather notebook, a copy of the U.S. Constitution, and, of course, a perfectly detailed, white chocolate mold of the Capitol Building dome. It was a testament to the dedication of the Program staff that the domes, which are typically shared by delegates in D.C., had arrived in one piece on doorsteps across the nation. At the end of the second day of the program, delegates were instructed to hold their dome up to the camera. I watched, delighted, as nearly all 104 of us reached down and procured the white chocolate confections on a moment's notice. As I scrolled through my fellow delegates' expectant smiles, I realized that even online, we were determined to enjoy time-honored USSYP activities together.

Still, I was conscious of the pandemic context under which we entered Washington Week. Though my interests lie far outside the field of medicine, I was elated to hear from Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases. Dr. Fauci has become a household name as he has guided the nation through the devastating COVID-19 crisis in the past year. During our session, one delegate asked him what he has learned from handling COVID. He responded that when our communities are faced with a common enemy, if we're fighting with each other, that enemy will win. The pandemic, he said, had taught him the importance of working together to tackle a difficult situation. My generation has grown up in the midst of several crises, all of which have come to a head this year: intensifying climate change, historic racial and economic inequality, and now a pandemic that has claimed more than half a million American lives. Given our increasingly polarized political and social climate, Dr. Fauci's words weighed on me.

But by the end of Washington Week, the weight lifted, as I recognized the fulfillment of USSYP's greatest tradition: building connections between a diverse next generation of leaders. I had spent days engaging in productive, respectful dialogue with young people from completely different demographic and ideological backgrounds. I had felt the divides between us, political and otherwise, begin to melt away. As we closed the program, I realized that despite our unconventional Washington Week, USSYP had successfully prepared 2021's delegates to heed Dr. Fauci's wisdom. In addition to decadent sweets and digital tours, the program offered an opportunity to start working together to tackle the political challenges of the 21st century. In the end, our experience wasn't such a departure from tradition after all.