

Georgia Balius, MT – 2021

When I first began my United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) application process, I never dreamed I would actually be accepted into the program. When I was notified that I had been chosen as a finalist, I was surprised. However, this was nothing compared to how I felt when I was notified that I would be one of two delegates to represent Montana in the 2021 United States Senate Youth Program. I was convinced some kind of mistake had to have been made, but I regardless was elated and welcomed the opportunity to learn and grow through this incredible program. I truly feel grateful that I had the chance to participate in this program, and it is a special point in my life that I will always remember.

Despite being online this year, the USSYP coordinators put a great deal of effort into keeping the program as enriching and special as possible given the circumstances. Though we were unable to meet with them in person, I nonetheless absolutely loved getting to hear from all of our speakers. My favorites were those who were welcoming, willing to answer questions in depth, and seemed excited about their jobs and the future of young people like us - you could feel their warmth and genuineness, even though a screen. These speakers included Scott Kelly, who told us that the sky is not the limit; Dr. Betty Koed, who shared her goal of making historical accounts more inclusive; and Brian Kamoie, who offered to connect with each one of us on LinkedIn. Of course, these were not the only speakers I enjoyed listening to! Personally, hearing speeches from and getting the chance to speak to hugely influential individuals such as Justice Clarence Thomas, Dr. Anthony Fauci, and Norah O'Donnell is something I will never forget.

While the bulk of our Zoom calls were made up of listening to speakers and Q&A sessions, one of the most exciting aspects of the programs for me personally was getting to build relationships, including meeting and interacting with the other delegates. Coming from a small town in Montana, it was a joy to meet so many incredibly intelligent young people from across the country. I certainly was not as knowledgeable as many of them, but took this as a learning opportunity and tried to listen to the different views and political opinions across the spectrum that I otherwise would not be exposed to in my regular life. Because the program was online this year, I do think that we were all able to connect perhaps more so than in a regular year, and now have built in chat groups that will hopefully last long enough for all of us to see each other grow into leaders and influencers in our fields.

Washington Week ONLINE and the USSYP program was truly an indescribable experience, but I have done my best to give a few highlights. I heard from amazing speakers, met incredible delegates from across the country, and much more (spoke to astronauts on the ISS, connected with my supportive and encouraging Military Mentor, Major Hanrahan, and had Zoom calls with my senators!). Though the entire program was over in less than a week, my memories of it will last far longer. I have emerged from the program with a renewed sense of hope in my generation and excitement for the future. I am truly grateful to the Hearst Foundations for giving me this opportunity, and can't wait to see the force for good that the 2021 delegates will be in the years to come.