

## Trinity Rieger, MT – 2021

On February 6th, I received an email stating that I was selected as one of the two delegates to represent Montana in the 59th Annual United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP). When I applied for the USSYP, I never once thought I would move to the interview process, let alone be selected as one of the one hundred four students from the fifty states, District of Columbia, and Department of Defense Education Activity. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, USSYP staff held Washington Week virtually on “the zoom where it happens.” I cannot even begin to comprehend the preparation and organization needed to host this event online, but I was overwhelmed at the incredibly smooth-sailing Washington Week ONLINE. Although virtual, participating in the USSYP is by far the most notable experience of my life.

On account of the virtual format, delegates tackled the tasks of taking their own portraits for name tags, ensuring their device met all technical requirements, and recording a Roll Call of the States introductory video. Student delegates also received a Welcome Bag in a Box through the mail, which included the white chocolate Capitol dome, a traditional element of the USSYP. To my surprise, my fellow Montana delegate, Georgia Balias, and I had the privilege of meeting with Senator Daines and Senator Tester before the week commenced. Senator Daines told Georgia and I that we represented rural Montana wonderfully, but we presented ourselves like we were from New York. In our conversations, both Daines and Tester shared how they became Senators. Neither went to college for political science, public administration, public policy, or any other major one would pursue to prepare for a career in Government. This fact really stuck out to me. As someone who does not have a clear plan for their future career, I appreciated that they did not either in their youth and educational endeavors. Conversations with my Senators taught me that I can still be successful without knowing how I am going to accomplish that goal. Overall, my meetings with Steve Daines and Jon Tester positively contributed to my USSYP experience.

Washington Week ONLINE began with a welcoming orientation session on Sunday at 9:30 AM. From Sunday, my favorite event was Captain Scott Kelly’s keynote address. Captain Kelly taught me that the sky is not the limit, and wearing the same pair of pants for six months was acceptable in space. As for Monday, Dr. Betty Koed was my favorite speaker with a close second, Justice Thomas. Since most of our history was recorded through a man’s eyes, Dr. Betty Koed stated that her job as Senate Historian is to reevaluate history through a woman’s perspective. As a result, I believe that Dr. Koed is making history herself.

From Tuesday, the third day of the USSYP, my favorites included Dr. Collins, Dr. Fauci, and Norah O’Donnell. Recognizing their influence through the COVID-19 pandemic, speaking with the Director of the NIH and Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases provided incredible insight. Norah O’Donnell opened her keynote address with ten pieces of advice for the delegates. She presented herself with such power and professionalism, and she answered every question candidly and thoroughly. The last day of the program, Wednesday, presented Gina McCarthy, White House National Climate Advisor. In respect to Washington Week, I created a goal to learn more about environmental policy and action to combat climate change. Gina McCarthy believes that fear should not be used to push the climate change agenda, but society should realize that sustainability provides job opportunities, good health, and a future for the next generation.

Reviewing the entirety of Washington Week Online, my favorite speaker must be Norah O’Donnell, Anchor and Managing Editor, *CBS Evening News and Contributor for 60 Minutes*. Personally, I appreciated her keynote address and responses to our questions, and her ten pieces of advice connected with me. Considering her advice, the most meaningful included working a nine-to-five does not equal success, be a listener, and survival is underrated. As a news anchor, Ms. O’Donnell impacts citizens’ understanding of world events. Her high standards and dedication to truth, evidence, and accuracy inspire me. Live in the CBS studio, Ms. O’Donnell provided delegates with an encouraging, captivating presentation. All in all, Norah O’Donnell left the most memorable impression in my eyes.

Overall, I will forever feel the impact of the United States Senate Youth Program. The prestigious, respectable, and powerful tone of this program led me to question my potential. After growing up in a rural community of one hundred fifty people, the USSYP opened my eyes to the endless opportunities and avenues toward success. I feel inspired to seek knowledge, be the best version of myself, and make a difference. I will foster, build, and maintain the connections I have made through this program; being an alumna of the reputable USSYP is an incredible honor. I am forever in debt to those who made this program possible. Thank you to the Hearst Foundations, USSYP staff, and fellow delegates for providing me with this phenomenal opportunity.