

Micah Schlittenhardt, ND – 2021

Though my experience with the United States Senate Youth Program was stifled on account of the coronavirus pandemic, I still walked away with invaluable knowledge, lifelong friendships, and a newfound admiration of public service. My class, though unconventional in form through Zoom, was able to experience Washington Week unlike any other alumnus, having the opportunity to have an address from American astronauts at the International Space Station. Though stricken with sadness for being the first class in 59 years to be virtual, the experience via Zoom went above and beyond any expectation I ever constructed and made for a deeply enriching opportunity.

Through keynotes and question/answer portions, I was able to greet remarkable United States governmental figures including President Joseph Biden, Justice Clarence Thomas, Dr. Francis Collins and Dr. Anthony Fauci, Senators James Lankford (R-OK) and Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), and Norah O'Donnell, to name a few. I also was able to partake in tours of George Washington's Mount Vernon, the Supreme Court, the Brazilian Embassy, and the Pentagon. Washington Week ONLINE presented the unique opportunity to explore these places from the comfort of my own home, reflecting a myriad of the interworkings of our government that other USSYP classes would not have had the opportunity to experience before.

I was excited to share my passion for U.S. healthcare in discussion with Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, then continued advocacy for legislation supporting programs like Telehealth (of which I wrote my USSYP application essay) into my Military Mentor Zoom Debriefings. Additionally, inspired by Senator James Lankford (R-OK) for the Christian faith we share, I was excited to share my conviction in faith with my Military Mentor group. The zestful and convicted individuals in my mentor group greeted me with kindness despite our differences and taught me the importance of confidence in the political realm. Additionally, forging these connections will not only aid me as my career advances, but socially in the soft skills I gained from the experience of communicating during Washington Week ONLINE. My gratitude to interact with these inspirational figures extends infinitely. I feel indebted to both these speakers, my co-delegates, and the program for the thought-provoking discourse and discussion we shared.

My favorite part of the experience, however, was the opportunity to partake in private Zoom sessions with Senator Kevin Cramer (R-ND) and Senator John Hoeven (R-ND). These meetings allowed me to communicate with these important individuals on issues North Dakota is facing and policies important to my mission in public service. I was even offered by both of their offices to intern on Capitol Hill with them!

I am forever grateful to the United States Senate Youth Program for its extent of efforts to make Washington Week Online a paradigm-shattering week. Humbled and honored, I look forward to using the knowledge and perspective I gained to propel me into a life of service.