

Siddharth Satish, NJ - 2021

My hands made their way across the moleskin book in front of me. Opening the book felt like a sin. In its form right now, it was perfect. No scribble marks or tears of both happiness and joy had stained the pristine sheets in front of me. I wanted to let it be.

When I joined the Zoom session that morning, the white waiting room screen welcomed me. My hand still lay on the book, but my mind focused on the activities for the day. Today was the first day of my delegate journey. It was going to be filled with tours, speakers and videos that had been put together on our behalf. As this realization dawned on me, both nerves and excitement filled my body as I waited to enter the room and officially begin Washington Week.

When the white of my screen disappeared to welcome the faces of my 103 fellow delegates, I couldn't help but smile. I was probably one of a handful of people, who was grinning ear to ear even before our roll call began.

As the first day went on, we began with our formal introductions and orientation activities. We met with our Military Mentors, and we learned with each other about the rich history of George Washington's Mount Vernon. The book I had been afraid to use, now was open with ink filling every crevice in the neatest way I was capable of. My hand became the appendage that connected the speaker 200 miles away, to the paper in front of me.

When I learned about the history of Mount Vernon, I grew fond of not only its architecture but the way in which modern historians are trying to revive the memories of the slaves that were once incarcerated there. We learnt about George Washington but also of his enslaved valet William Lee, beginning the process of resuscitating the identities of those who had been reduced to the unmarked graves in Washington's plantation.

Following this exploration, we got to hear from NASA astronaut Scott Kelly. He not only infected our Zoom screens with laughter, but also left us with an enduring message on the nature of success. Captain Kelly told us that, "how good you are when you start does not impact how good you will become." In a world of instant gratification, instantaneous success has also been of greater demand. Recognizing that this demand is both absurd and unattainable, helped me realize that mastery can never be achieved overnight.

After the end of the first day, I went to bed both exhausted and in eager anticipation of the judicial branch review that was forthcoming. Hearing from judge Robert Henry and his views on journalism and modern politics, left an indelible impression on me. Differentiating fact from fiction was the responsibility of attorneys and judges, and overcoming the cacophony of the news and politics was often the best way to achieve this prospect. Listening to the writing that Judge Henry cited and the work that he had engaged in, caused my hand to nearly cramp up. As I tried to follow the depth of his experiences with the shallowness of the ink in my pen.

The next few days of Washington week were filled with effervescent discussion on matters of political urgency. However, more than any conversation about the current political issues, the one discussion that stuck in my mind was from Ms. Norah O'Donnell. Ms. O'Donnell spoke with our delegate cohort about the importance of cultivating relationships and the importance of maintaining those relationships. My fellow delegates and I got to learn from Ms. O'Donnell, the importance of nurturing our connections and sending hand-written thank you notes to show our appreciation.

By the end of my four days at Washington Week, as I stared down at the moleskin book in front of me, I realized how much I had written. Nearly 35 pages, streaked with ink and advice from the secretary of State to the president of our nation. It was then that I realized how this entire journey of Washington Week had changed me.

My initial apprehension on opening the book and cracking its spine was similar to the way so many of us come into Washington Week with our own set experiences. Many of us are often afraid to open up and show the beautiful chapters of our own lives because we are afraid of what may happen. Being a part of this Senate Youth Program forced us to reflect on ourselves, open ourselves up to soak in the wealth of information we had been made privy to. And by the end, we all walked away with more ink and knowledge on our pages. We all walked away with a greater understanding of both the government and the way in which our chapter books fit into the library of American history.