

Yuttichai Eric Sommla, NM - 2021

I had known about the United States Senate Youth Program since middle school, and I can assure you I knew the contents of the website like the back of my hand. Even with my extensive knowledge of the program from afar, I never thought I would be bestowed the honor of representing New Mexico in this prestigious program. When the state coordinator had informed me of my selection on February 5th, my immediate reaction was an instant distrust for the validity of that email ... well apparently, it wasn't a mistake. Starting then and there, I would join the other 6,000 delegates and alumni on this life changing journey.

Before I reflect over my highlights of the 59th Washington Week itinerary, I would like to take a moment to discuss probably one of the most important aspects of the program, the civil discourse. Since the start of the unofficial official Discord server, delegates across the nation have tackled many of our country's problems through passionate exchanges over text, call, and Zoom. Delegates like myself entered the program with a heightened level of respect for one another that allowed all ideas, ranging from unpopular to radical, to be hashed out deliberately and fairly. Being able to pose my beliefs without the fear of attacks without merit has renewed my hope in tomorrow's possible leaders.

Now I could not possibly write a reflection without first discussing the National Institutes of Health tour with Drs. Collins, Fauci, and Milgram. Having my career goals set towards the public health field, it was an absolute privilege to hear from the leading individuals in biomedical research and our national treasure, Dr. Fauci, *America's doctor*. Their unique insight and candid responses provided me with new perspectives on my education and career plans that I will forever cherish—special shout-out to Dr. Milgram and her initiatives to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment at the National Institutes of Health! But beyond my strong affinity towards the sciences, this experience was enlightening as I heard from various policy areas that I wasn't well versed on. Seeing such a diverse pallet of policy areas represented in this year's program gave me a greater appreciation for our political system and its ability to consider the multitude of actors and interests in each and every action taken.

It would be a shame if I did not take a moment in my reflective essay to highlight my Military Mentor, Major McClain. His mentorship and advice provided to us, the "Allstars," has been particularly impactful to me. Although my fellow delegates and I spent a rather limited amount of time with Major McClain, the discussions we participated in were truly engaging and most memorable. After a long and rigorous day, it was refreshing to recap and review what had occurred in each session with the Allstars; it was a chance to further inspect the remarks of each speaker to ensure we fully grasped all they had to say. Thank you to all in my mentor group and Major McClain for such a wonderful experience... *what is a life worth living without shooting our shot?*

I take great pride in knowing that in the 59 years that this program has cultivated leaders, I have the distinction of being a part of the first ever virtual delegate class. Having attended hundreds of virtual events since March 2020, I can wholeheartedly state that the Hearst Foundations exceeded many of my expectations and remarkably preserved the spirit of the United States Senate Youth Program I knew since middle school.