

Joanna Bieda, NV – 2021

The first comprehensive Washington Week ONLINE was destined to break boundaries. With no established precedent, 104 capable, intuitive, and forward-thinking youth representing the United States found themselves displaced from the halls of the Senate and sorted into Zoom squares. If asked on my first day, I would not be able to predict the efficacy with which our online platform managed to cut the “distance” between us all. While parts of my week might have been riddled with early mornings and slow internet speeds, they were soon highlighted by intriguing questions and insightful answers in several speaker sessions. With a handful of the world’s most captivating and knowledgeable leaders and figures, CBS Evening News’ Ms. Norah O’Donnell’s words resonated with me--and others--the most.

In a week filled with breaking boundaries, Ms. O’Donnell told us never to break the following tenets:

First, seek to be informed, not affirmed. Some speakers harbored viewpoints that we disagreed with, but nevertheless, they exposed facets of the American consciousness that go often unconsidered in our circles. I am reminded of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, the explanation he provided behind how he ruled on a landmark case, and the pointed questions he received from my cohort; witnessing Justice Thomas explain how he deliberates would unravel years of mythos and obfuscation I perceived about the legal system’s relationship with the People. Whether it was policy on Capitol Hill or legal opinion in the Supreme Court, our strongest points came from our firm disagreements.

Second, be open to new opportunities. During Washington Week, there was nothing short of a plethora of activities to substitute for an in-person experience. One of most notable experiences included a conversation with Senator Jacky Rosen on her recent efforts in the Senate Special Committee on Aging, with follow-up encouraged on both sides. Between nightly delegate Zoom calls, self-driven calls-to-action, individual meetings with my Military Mentor, and more, my week would not have been the same if I did not elect to do all that was made available to me.

Finally, ask the right questions. Receiving the right answers depends almost entirely on asking the right questions. It took nightly research to craft unique, provoking questions for each speaker, only to hear equally intriguing ones asked before and after my own. An Illinois delegate asked Astronaut Scott Kelly about the future of politics and neutrality in space; another asked him what it meant to have humanity. I found myself wondering about his experiments and their implications in space. To ask questions to people such as Astronaut Scott Kelly and other leaders was to ask questions about the fabric of our society.

It was evident that Ms. O’Donnell’s advice weaved excellently into other speakers’ points. Her suggestion to consider perspectives beyond our own were paralleled with Senate Historian Betty Koed’s reminder that there exists a difference between “providing information” and “building knowledge.” Her guidance to always be open to new opportunities was likewise extended by Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas’ and Astronaut Scott Kelly’s personal narratives. Her advice to ask the right questions was reinforced by Ms. McCarthy’s careful considerations as National Climate Advisor.

The United States Senate Youth Program might seem distinguished by its traditions, but their innovation this year has provided me with a leading example of how cemented ideals can be molded to best accommodate the needs of a dynamic cohort, giving us a political lesson, as well as a humanitarian one.