

Katerina Corr, NY – 2021

What is one thing that United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) delegates have in common with astronauts? In my experience, the “overview effect.”

A few weeks before the start of Washington Week ONLINE, we each had the opportunity to submit a question for the astronauts currently aboard the International Space Station. Mine—what is one thing you have experienced while in space that changed your perspective toward life on Earth—was one of the questions lucky enough to be chosen. The astronauts responded that simply seeing the Earth in its entirety “without key legends and borders” demonstrated how special life is. The term “overview effect” describes this unique shift in awareness.

For me, attending the Senate Youth Program has inspired a similar sense of awe and understanding. On March 14, I suddenly found myself escaping the world of newspaper columns and press conferences and Zooming in (pun intended) to learn about government from the headliners themselves. So, in my attempt to capture the essence of this experience, I ask you to join me on a trip through one space (Zoom) and many interesting times for an overview of the USSYP “overview effect” as told by of our incredible speakers:

“If you’re not in the room, people are talking about you. When you enter the room, people talk with you.” – Senator Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin

Senator Baldwin’s appearance at Virtual Washington Week is an experience that will probably never fade from my memory. Despite it being the late afternoon of a packed program day, Senator Baldwin’s charisma radiated brightly through the screen. As a student who was raised primarily by her maternal grandparents, learning that Senator Baldwin had also grown up with her grandparents was especially exciting. Senator Baldwin began her talk by recounting her inspiration for entering public service, a significant illness she battled as a child which pushed her to recognize the faults in our healthcare system. It was fascinating to learn how this passion for guaranteeing quality healthcare has followed and inspired Senator Baldwin throughout her career, from learning about the first cases of HIV while running for a local council to now investigating how systemic racism is intertwined with medicine.

One of my favorite anecdotes told by Senator Baldwin was about a calculus course she took in college. Her professor would purposefully assign unsolvable equations with the intention of seeing how their students approached problem-solving. As Senator Baldwin said, in the case of calculus (and politics), “every problem started off as insoluble.” As an aspiring representative, I hope that if I ever have the privilege of holding elected office, I will embody the same tenacity and values as Senator Baldwin.

*“It’s not about affirmation, but information. Truth is the cornerstone of everything we do.”
– Norah O’Donnell*

As frequent consumers of broadcast and print journalism, I'm sure my fellow delegates would agree with me in saying how exciting it was to meet Ms. Norah O'Donnell. Watching her speak from the set of CBS Evening News, I kept having to remind myself that somehow I wasn't viewing a pre-taped clip from her show, but actually having a live conversation! Ms. O'Donnell's session during Washington Week ONLINE was particularly energizing not only because of the unique role she plays as a journalist in holding public officials accountable, but also because of the invaluable life advice she shared. As I look toward the future, I will certainly remember Ms. O'Donnell's nuggets of wisdom: strive to be the most well-read in the room, be a good listener, "the quality of your life is the quality of your relationships", and "who you work for is more important than what you do."

Additionally, I found Ms. O'Donnell's breakdown of the "perfect question" (one that is tough, but fair) especially interesting. Sometimes, like when Ms. O'Donnell sat down with President Biden in February 2021, it was challenging just to determine which topics to spotlight. At other times, for example during Ms. O'Donnell's interview with Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman, a straight-forward tone was of the essence. In all, hearing from Ms. O'Donnell and learning about the field she calls "a front row seat to history" was illuminating.

"Don't close your windows of observation for seeing what's out there." – Dr. Francis Collins

When Washington Week began, I felt that I had a relatively clear sense of my interests within public service. Yet, throughout the week, I found myself giddy at the thought of exploring a new field. After Ms. O'Donnell's session, I wondered if I would enjoy a career like hers, asking the "tough questions" and educating a nation. When we heard from Dr. Anthony Fauci, whom I had the incredible honor of introducing, I questioned if I had too quickly disregarded public health as a career field after a difficult first semester of freshman biology. Similarly, during our days focused around the judiciary branch and foreign service, the excitement of hearing about specialized pathways was overwhelming. Even with a minor existential crisis on my hands over what exactly I'd like to do in the future, I am thankful for the Senate Youth Program for inspiring me to keep the curtains, shades, blinds, and all else wide open on my "windows of observation."

"You'll never get rich doing this, but you'll have a rich life." – Gina McCarthy

I first discovered my interest in government during middle school while working on a legislative initiative to encourage New York City public schools to create Gender-Sexuality Alliances. It was during my testimony before the New York City Council that I realized that public service, whether that meant running for office or volunteering for an impactful non-profit, was exactly what I hoped to do with my life. When I learned about USSYP as a high school freshman, I was determined to attend and after being selected as an Alternate in 2020, my enthusiasm only grew. Although I was initially unsure how the first-ever Virtual Washington Week would compare to my expectations, the experience was absolutely invaluable. In the words of our Program Director Ms. Rayne Guilford, it was "the Zoom where it happens!" Above all, if there is one thing I have taken away from USSYP, it is a strengthened conviction to pursue the truly "rich life" of a public servant.