

Maxwell Mimaroglu, NY – 2021

When our democracy was founded there was an understanding that ‘We the people’ were a select few white men who owned property. Representatives, senators, and even presidents kept open offices for even fewer who had enough influence to warrant a meeting. We’ve come a long way since those days, with a more representative Congress, direct elections of our senators, and the invention of technology-- we the people have been able to make real change. Through the generosity of the Hearst Foundations and the judges, representatives, politicians, and civil servants who spoke with us we were able to regain a feeling of direct democracy which so many have fought for over the last few centuries.

Having to clear a week’s schedule of school and work seemed like a large hassle, not to mention keeping up with the ever alive group chat filled with one hundred or so delegates. With so much going on this year it seemed like another stressor. Little did I know that the group chat, and the thousands of messages, would help me find some of the most passionate and caring young people from across the country. What at first seemed like a week of sitting in front of a computer turned into a week of exploring and meeting with civil servants who seemed to share the same passion as my fellow delegates and me.

Looking through the schedule for the week, I remember talking with my parents about all the influential and amazing speakers-- and maybe bragging to my brothers a little-- but when I had the opportunity to speak with, to ask questions, and to listen to those speakers I began to truly understand the power that this week might hold on the rest of my life. I remember asking myself, ‘why do I get the opportunity to speak with these leaders?’ thinking about the thousands of high schoolers who could have also benefited from speaking and listening to them. We have become part of a select few who got this first-hand impact.

I was given the opportunity to introduce one particularly famous speaker, Dr. Anthony Fauci. When I received the email, I ran upstairs and woke my mother up. Not only did I get to ask questions of Dr. Fauci but I got to thank a man who epitomized values of honesty, trust, and commitment to the public good. A quote that stood out to me as he spoke was, “ethics do not change, but opinions do.” He spoke about the importance of unity in this instance stating, “the virus was the enemy, not each other.” After speaking to many politicians and elected officials it was inspiring to hear from the voice of a public servant, someone whose job was not to help divide the country and push his own agenda, but rather to advance the good of the people.

Another speaker whose words touched me was Norah O'Donnell. I was familiar with her groundbreaking work and regularly watched her segments on 60 Minutes. Part of what surprised me was her emphasis on work ethic. She said that, “You should be the most read person in the room.” Emphasizing that it isn’t about how smart you are, but the effort you are willing to put in to stay up to date and educated.

It is part of our responsibility of the select few who got this opportunity to spread what we’ve learned with our communities. We must learn from our history of the all boys club of politics and share the knowledge and connections we’ve gained with our people. Part of what inspired me about this program was the diversity in thought and background of the delegates, but that is only the first step in our journey towards advancing equity.