

Anna MacLennan, OH – 2021

Without a doubt, the United States Senate Youth Program's (USSYP) Washington Week will forever be one of the most remarkable and impactful weeks of my life. It is a daunting task to reflect upon the entirety of the vast and diverse program in such a short essay—especially in a manner that does justice to the life-changing insights I received, conversations I had, and people I met—but I will attempt to capture an echo of my experience to share with any who may read this.

I will not try to sum up every incredible speaker or inspiring moment—there were simply too many to recount—but one thing that especially struck me was the way Washington Week highlighted the intersection of science and policy. From Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Francis Collins in public health, to astronauts on the International Space Station, to Ms. Gina McCarthy (White House National Climate Advisor), Washington Week made clear that science and government—two of my biggest passions—are not competing forces; rather, they work together as interconnected allies in public service.

I think, like many of my co-delegates, I began Washington Week with a mixture of emotions, namely a combination of excitement and wistfulness—eagerly anticipating the incredible experience that was to come, while also wondering at what could have been if not for the pandemic. However, as Mr. Cox called our first Zoom session to order and the program truly commenced, all of my thoughts coalesced into a single, resounding feeling: *Grateful, Grateful, Grateful*. From the first moment of the program, I have been overwhelmed with gratitude—to the Hearst Foundations for providing such a generous opportunity and scholarship, to the program's amazing speakers for taking time out of their extremely busy schedules to answer our (sometimes piercing) questions, to my parents and teachers for their unwavering support, and to every single person who has ever seen potential in me and invested their energy to help me see that potential in myself too. I have been immensely uplifted by my community, and I hope that in my life's work in public service, I can uplift them in return. In my co-delegates' Zoom squares, I saw windows into their own communities—sembled from nearly every corner and background of the United States—and for the first time, I saw our collective potential to help build our country's future by uplifting our individual communities.

As I talked with my fellow delegates in our Military Mentor sessions, informal after-program Zoom hangout calls, and via social media, I found the sentiment to be even more present—an underlying buzz giving energy and inspiration to our every conversation. I found in my co-delegates one of the most thoughtful, intelligent, and empowering groups of friends I have ever met. Bonded by our shared passion for public service, government, and politics, we understood each other at a level I have rarely encountered before. Moreover, despite our strong opinions across the political spectrum—often backed by reasoning very close to our hearts—our discussions never strayed into personal attacks or escalated into counterproductive arguments. We were always firmly grounded in our mutual respect for one another, even—*especially*—when considering hot-button or contentious issues. To any of my Military Mentors or fellow delegates reading this, *Thank You* for cultivating such an atmosphere of trust and respect. I hope we will all carry that with us into the next chapters of our lives.

In the coming years, I suspect that I will cross paths with many of my remarkable co-delegates in unpredictable and fortuitous ways; I am excited not only by the idea of finally meeting them all in person, but also by the prospect of the wonderfully impactful work we could do together to improve our country. We are people forever linked by USSYP and the common foundation in public service we have gained from the program—one rooted in the values of integrity, empathy, and mutual respect. I would say “I can't wait to see how we will change the world,” but knowing my co-delegates, I firmly believe that we are all already changing it.