

## **Victoria Richard, RI – 2021**

This last year has been abundant with challenges and filled with disappointments. However, I can gladly say that the United States Senate Youth Program Online was neither of those things. To be candid, I had no clue what to truly expect when we began the online program, but I found myself more than pleasantly surprised with the experience. A fulfilling week full of incredible speakers, inspiring discussions with Military Mentors, and a new group chat full of incredible friends that is still thriving. Working in our current situation as a nation in the midst of a pandemic, there was nothing more I could have wanted from the online platform.

It was an absolute honor to be able to speak with so many government officials and even receive a message from President Joe Biden! Each speaker - ranging from Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, to CBS Anchor Norah O'Donnell, to astronauts live from the International Space Station, to senators and diplomatic officers - did an amazing job answering questions and giving their best professional advice. A few highlights that really stuck with me centered around discussions of hope for the future - which came up quite frequently. When Senator Baldwin was discussing how important it is that Congress is becoming much more diverse, she mentioned, "If you're not in the room, the conversation is *about* you. If you are in the room, the conversation is *with* you." I think all of my fellow delegates and I can agree that it is a wonderful thing that more conversations are happening *with* people and not just *about* people. In addition, when the topic of polarization in politics arose, Senator Lankford said a phrase that really struck a chord with me, stating "When we are serving the most, we are fighting the least". To me, this philosophy should be at the heart of all those Congress and public service and it was nice to hear both the Senators speak on the importance of bipartisanship.

I also had the pleasure of working with my Military Mentor, Captain Molly Baker. These mentor groups were a great way for us to break down and reflect on all that we learned at the end of each day, allowing us to state our favorite highlights or go over questions and responses. Captain Baker always kept us updated on what the plan was for the day and greeted us with a smile each morning and a farewell each night. Captain Baker was also able to share some of her stories and experiences of working in the military working as a pilot and spoke about her future plans of moving to Alaska as well. Her words of wisdom and overall guidance through the program was incredibly appreciated.

Finally, I must express my gratitude for this opportunity that led me to meeting over 100 amazing, young individuals who all strive to change this nation for the better. Even though we never officially met, when you all are spamming the group chat into the early morning on a school night or making ridiculously hilarious memes, I feel as though we have all been long time friends. I cannot wait to see all the incredible and inspiring things my fellow delegates will achieve. In reference to the poem Mr. Brian Kamoie mentioned, together, we can all make hope and history rhyme. USSYP, from the coordinators, speakers, announcers, and photographers, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. This has been an experience I will never forget.