

## Lucia Enriquez, TN – 2021

It is wondrous to discover that it is possible to make big changes in small spaces. My younger self would trip over my shoelaces while running to drop the assortment of my grandma's pennies, quarters, and dollar bills into the water bottle holding donations for babies in Zambia. I had never been to Zambia, but I knew it was important to *know* about Zambia. My grandma wanted me to learn generosity, and so we gave: to newspaper vendors, stranded drivers, the stray cat that came by our porch. Through my grandma, I witnessed the execution of White House Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy's words: "in public service, you won't get rich, but you'll have the richest life." I decided that I wanted to be a giver.

My space in Middle Tennessee's suburbia was made big when I first opened the chain of group messages from my 103 fellow delegates. Before me, my world expanded into their small towns, into their favorite songs, books, politicians, and opinions on ideology and contemporary issues. Day by day, I broke in the illustrated pages of *The Senate* and George Washington's *Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior* until I found myself sitting straighter, valuing my mannerisms more, and even considering buying a handkerchief because the father of our country seems to have loved them.

Prior to joining rows of tiny Zoom boxes for a week of continuous engagement with government officials, my curiosity was piqued by the mystery behind the pathway to high-achieving leadership. The resounding consensus for this inquiry that I took notes on while soaking up coming-of-age stories from astronauts and senators alike was that individual purpose will triumph over any living condition you are born into. People, people like Astronaut Scott Kelly and Senator Tammy Baldwin, rise in ranking not for where they started, but how they responded. On my first day of Washington Week, I entered the opening ceremony believing that certain types of people are "fit" to lead. While circumstance and natural inclination is part of the equation to prosperity, USSYP showed me firsthand the larger reality: that ordinary people learn to do extraordinary things by carving out their own path to fulfillment.

I spent a generous amount of time during Washington Week thinking "How did I earn this?" The truth is, I didn't. USSYP has given me privileges that many would give anything to have, and the generosity of the Hearst Foundations has allowed me the honor of existing in a space of prestige, intellectual stimulation, and growth. Each day was memorable, whether I was giving an introduction for Secretary of State Antony Blinken, learning about my mentor group's favorite - or least favorite - foods with Captain Tony Starks, or discussing classical languages and making Hamilton puns with Mr. Jakub Mosur. I learned that some astronauts don't wear pants during meetings, evaluated the merits of both originalism and living constitutional interpretations, and found that there's a place for everyone in public service. As a first generation American who learned early that it's hard to make ends meet, this lesson was hard but necessary to grasp.

Due to my previous worldview that large spaces are intimidating and unreachable, I have lived most of my life being afraid of something. This is inherent to the human condition, but with my high-functioning anxiety, small moments of putting myself in the limelight produce big waves of nerves. Hearing a recount of CBS Anchor Norah O'Donnell's interview with Malala Yousafzai made me see fear as a manageable symptom rather than an impediment. When Ms. O'Donnell inquired about Malala's fear of the Taliban, she replied, "I may be afraid of ghosts and goblins, but why should I be afraid of someone who's afraid of me?" The line stuck with Ms. O'Donnell, and it now has with me. No matter the career path I end up taking, I know that "don't be fearful of the truth" will forever be a part of my vocabulary. Ms. O'Donnell's words proved to me that when putting perspective to the world, there is really little to fear at all. Justice Clarence Thomas also said himself that there's not a big distance between where we currently are and where we aspire to go. I can now go forward unafraid of the big world in front of me, realizing that while it seems daunting to me, it looks small to astronauts on the International Space Station: it all depends on one's perspective.

I want to express my gratitude to the USSYP alumni mentors who ignited my eagerness to pursue a public service career, my Military Mentor Captain Starks for having the coolest name ever, and the staff in its entirety who made all 104 of us feel truly special. I am indebted to this program and hope to pay it forward in the future. John Lewis's words beckoned us on Washington Week's closing night: "do what you can to redeem our country." USSYP has undoubtedly shown us that this country is truly ours, and that we *will* be its upcoming generation of redeemers.