

Mythili “Tilly” Krishna, VT – 2021

“Dare to believe in yourself... They chose you for you.” I had just finished spending four days learning from Supreme Court justices, astronauts, White House advisors, and more, when USSYP alumnus Noah Harris stated this in his farewell speech. All week, I had felt overwhelmed by the greatness that surrounded me -- the students, the guests, everyone -- and I wondered if I was really worth this experience. Noah Harris’ statement gave me the courage to put my fears aside and realize that I too am capable of greatness, and that this program was only the beginning for me.

The USSYP 2021 Washington Week ONLINE was kicked off with former astronaut Scott Kelly and his presentation titled “The Sky is **NOT** the Limit.” His entire talk was tremendously eye-opening as I learned about space exploration in a way that was not exclusively related to science, but about the larger role that space exploration plays in our society. I learned from Astronaut Kelly that life is about aiming high, focusing on *what you can control*, and understanding that we’re all connected in one way or another. In describing the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of viewing planet Earth from space, he said the experience makes you a humanitarian; a humanitarian in a sense that once you see the Earth from outer space as a planet, you feel there is no human problem that cannot be solved. This optimistic outlook on humanity was something that comforted me and gave me hope for our future.

As someone who is currently looking to work in one of the three branches of government, speaking with Justice Clarence Thomas, Senator Tammy Baldwin, Senator James Lankford, and former Judge Robert Henry, gave me an exclusive look into the great minds of our nation. Justice Thomas and Judge Henry reemphasized for me the importance of the judicial system, conveying that the judiciary is truly *necessary* for democracy. Through speaking to them about their judicial interpretations, I was able to get a peek into what the thought processes are for legal experts such as themselves while figuring out how I could channel my thoughts into their processes. Though he is a strict constructionist, Justice Thomas instructed us to go about precedent in the following manner: “Maintain it for stability, but overturn it when necessary. When it’s wrong, it’s wrong.”

Hearing from Senator Baldwin and Senator Lankford was also incredibly insightful because I learned how they navigate the political sphere, their constituents, and their personal ideologies in order to effectively lead as representatives. While I did not fully agree with Senator Lankford on various issues, his talk was particularly engaging for me as he discussed how to balance pragmatic questions with lofty progressive goals. I tremendously appreciated his candor regarding his faith and his ability to own his identity and address how that influenced him as a legislator. Senator Baldwin, on the other hand, was someone I felt I personally identified with a lot because she spoke to the incorporation of justice and progressive change with the current governmental system. Hearing her personal journey into politics as a woman and the first openly gay member to be elected to Senate was inspiring and it empowered me to maintain my goal of serving in government.

In the realm of the executive branch, I appreciated speaking with White House National Climate Advisor Ms. Gina McCarthy. Her passionate speech about how we must address our planet’s climate crisis was eye opening and very insightful. I’ve done some climate advocacy work in the past, but never before did I see such a clear set of action items that were pragmatic as well as significant in relation to climate action. She spoke to the importance of effective investments to better the economy while simultaneously cutting down on carbon emissions, and detailed her plan down to the last infrastructural change. I also very much valued what Ms. McCarthy had to say about the role of the government in fighting the climate crisis, and the role of the United States, as a privileged nation, in helping other countries, that may not have the means to do so, to do the same. I learned from her the importance of clear goals, commitment to protecting our people, and owning our privilege and taking on the responsibility we have to support collective liberation.

After many attempts throughout the week, I finally got to ask a question to a speaker during Washington Week, and that speaker was CBS Evening News anchor Norah O'Donnell. I was never one to think about going into journalism, but after speaking with Ms. O'Donnell, I realized just how important journalism was for our democracy and our society as a whole. In her presentation, Ms. O'Donnell said "Sunshine is the best disinfectant" and immediately *Washington Post's* slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness" came to mind. It hit me that though the media has become a seemingly chaotic mess of biased views, the news is still a huge pillar of our democracy because it yields the power to expose injustice even when the system attempts to conceal their actions from the public. Ms. O'Donnell went on to describe various experiences she had had in journalism, and suddenly I found myself rushing to take down any and all pieces she had for aspiring journalists, a label I had never previously considered for myself.

Commit to serve. Think big. Take bold action and be an ethical leader. These were the three pillars that Mr. Brian Kamoie from the Department of Homeland Security started his speech off with, and I will undoubtedly carry these pillars with me through the rest of my journey as an advocate. Throughout his talk, Mr. Kamoie recentered his message to one or all of these pillars, emphasizing how central they are to his work and how central they should be to ours. As I now look back on the USSYP Washington Week, and specifically to Mr. Kamoie's three pillars, I am reminded that we're in the business of serving the people who rely on us to do so. All of the speakers I had the privilege of engaging with brought various perspectives that pushed me to expand my idea of justice, and they encouraged me to have the courage to step into the national and global sphere of advocacy, wholeheartedly bringing myself to the stage to perform in service of others. As I prepare to leave my bubble of comfort and head to college, ready to step into a realm of advocacy unlike ever before, I will carry with me a quote Mr. Kamoie reminded me of. *What will you do with your one wild and precious life?* For now, I plan to spend my one wild and precious life leading with courage and conviction, and *daring to believe myself.*