

## Khanh Doan, WA – 2021

Begrudgingly opening my eyes at 6am on March 14th, 2021—two hours before the start of the first day of Washington Week—(although I had it much better than my peers in Hawaii who were coming onto Zoom at 4:45am)—I reluctantly tapped my alarm shut and rolled out of bed into the Washington cold of the morning, too anxious to not wake up early.

Less than two hours later, I sit in a chair at the corner of my bedroom—knees shaking, fingers fidgeting—in front of a live and ready camera, staring into a sea of similarly enthusiastic faces (as excited as kids in Pacific and Hawaii Time can be at so early in the morning of course). The shining eyes of nonprofit founders, division-1 scholarship offered athletes, class presidents, TEDx Talk presenters, Ivy League commits, published authors, national debate champions, and passionate community organizers stared back at me. The impressive merit of my peers—and not to mention the prestige of the government officials I would be speaking to—was nothing short of what I had expected.

Going into the application process of the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) as a student from an under resourced high school, one in which few (if not, any) students have applied much less won the scholarship, I anticipated a competitive and rigorous application process with peers who grew up with generational wealth alongside racial and class privilege that prepared them for such a process. After being chosen as the delegate to represent Washington State, this distinction only grew more obvious when I was surrounded by a filtered selection of the nation's best during Washington Week. I remember a delegate friend giving me a tour of the *mansion* they lived in over a hangout zoom, learning a peer owned a personal *plane*, and seeing the jaw-dropping prices of the prestigious pre-college courses another peer spent their summers taking at Harvard and Yale. A low-income student who spent my childhood embarrassed of my family's lack of wealth and learning to be frugal—counting excess change to take the city bus, double-checking grocery store receipts to make sure every coupon was accounted for, or spending the early morning of my Sundays filing my parents' unemployment claims—USSYP was one of the greatest culture shocks of my life. But where I had expected to feel alienated among those with such different backgrounds, the delegate friends I made throughout Washington Week uplifted my experiences with unanimous support. Together, we created a bond over our passion for public service and desire to learn about government.

In particular, hearing from guest speaker, Principal Deputy Spokesperson Ms. Jalina Porter was an incredibly valuable experience of my involvement in USSYP. When I asked Ms. Porter, about her thoughts on professionals of color or those from marginalized backgrounds in predominantly white fields dominated by white male authority assimilating to these spaces in the name of professionalism, it was comforting and affirming to hear Ms. Porter remind me to never, ever compromise myself. Something that struck me was when Ms. Porter advised me that diluting who I am is not only disrespectful to myself in that I am not being “100% me” and not allowing my individual self to be at its best (when it is authentic), but most importantly, diluting my values, beliefs, culture, and background limits the diversity of perspectives that are brought to the table. Ms. Porter explains that “limiting myself limits what others can *learn* from me.” As an immigrant from Vietnam who attends an incredibly diverse high school, I have grown up around diversity, but as my accomplishments grow in vastness, I find myself in more and more spaces where I am the only individual of color or the only individual who has faced socioeconomic barriers, and consequently, thinking I have to act a particular way to appease undertones of classism or racism—similar to how Ms. Porter expressed that as a Black woman, she often found herself as the single double or triple minority in a room. Hearing from Ms. Porter made me redefine how I approach these unfamiliar settings; my identity, although different, can be peripheral to those of my peers. Thank you, Ms. Porter, for helping me discover that my identity is an asset to better serve and represent others in public service.

But the most memorable program experience of all for me was when I had the privilege to speak with Harvard College Student Body President, Noah Harris. During his introduction, Mr. Harris spoke about his experiences navigating Harvard and feeling alienated in a community he was not used to, which led him to try to assimilate to those around him, who came from more privileged backgrounds. What he said after will stay with me forever: "I was trying to be a Harvard student before I realized I already was one—I didn't have to change anything about myself." When asking Mr. Harris about how he was able to get to that point where he felt like he truly was a Harvard student and belonged at Harvard, despite perhaps not being like the majority of students, Mr. Harris explained that he just wanted to be happy; being someone he wasn't or chasing after solely success, hollow accomplishments, or validation from others will never grant him happiness. I remember feeling my throat tighten when Mr. Harris said these things, because everything resonated so closely with me not only as someone from a similar low-income and underprivileged background, but also as someone who will be attending Columbia University next fall as the first in my family to attend college—where I will be thrown into a similar position of alienation: a first-generation, low-income immigrant at a predominantly white institution where the most common income bracket is over \$110,000. But these fears were smoothly eased when Mr. Harris affirmingly told me before my time with him ended (and this was when I had to try very hard not to cry in front of the camera): "When you step foot on Columbia next fall remember that you belong on that campus just as much as anyone else. You deserve to feel like you belong at Columbia."

USSYP gave me the experience of a lifetime. I was able to speak directly with a Supreme Court Justice, receive an address from the President, and engage in enlightening political discourse with like-minded peers. But what I did not expect to gain from the program was a newfound appreciation for myself and where I come from: the street markets of Ho Chi Minh City, the rustle of a beaten down hammock, the nail salon my mother worked at, the peeling apartment complexes of Everett, the homeless filled streets of Edmonds and Seattle, the crowded hallways of Mariner High School... The good and bad make up who I am. My unique experiences shaped my passion to help others from marginalized backgrounds, and my unique identity does not deserve to be diluted when it will help carry me through life with a specially diverse perspective that will allow me to serve others. I will be eternally grateful to USSYP for helping me realize not only the value of my background, experiences, and identity, but also how they are tangential to my duty as a public servant.