

Grace Steenbergen, WY - 2021

As I reflect on my experience with the United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP), there are so many thoughts and feelings that would like to share. From meeting my fellow delegates, to waving goodbye on our last zoom call, the impact my experience had was life changing. This year was virtual, but magical. The memories of meeting with public servants from around the nation, and the lessons learned, were also life altering. I built unbreakable relationships with fellow delegates and discussed national and international politics. As I look back, I appreciate the time to now examine and share my USSYP experience and the impact it had on my life.

I never thought that a few days of Zoom could change my life so dramatically. I left the USSYP an entirely different person. While I could write an essay on every interaction, from President Joe Biden to U.S. Astronaut Scott Kelly, I simply cannot choose just one USSYP discussion, or event, that was most impactful. In fact, from the time when the program began, to today, I have been beyond impressed by every delegate and individual I've met. I can honestly say that each speaker touched a different piece of my heart and mind and had a lasting impact. While I will be forever thankful and influenced by the speakers and USSYP events, the true individuals who had the biggest impact on me, were my fellow delegates. As soon as I came into contact with my fellow delegates, they opened my eyes to not only views from around the nation but the different perspectives and the backstory behind them. As my relationship with my fellow delegates began to flourish, they opened my eyes to new possibilities, bigger opportunities and ideas that I had never thought were possible. Before Washington Week, I had my beliefs and future plans set in stone. Now, after meeting my fellow delegates, hearing their stories and their and future aspirations, I am now considering law school on the East Coast. My fellow delegates also taught me countless lessons in compassion, diversity and understanding. As I learned more about political beliefs from around the country, I met high school students who share the same interests and values as myself. Having the opportunity to speak about my rural agriculture community with intelligent and impressive individuals from across the nation and represent Wyoming on a national level was truly the highlight of my experience. While my fellow delegates had a huge impact on me personally, Washington Week was another level experience in itself.

The week started with an insightful presentation by Astronaut Scott Kelly and ended with an inspiring closing by alumni Noah Harris. While all the speakers were above and beyond, the speaker who impacted me personally, was journalist Norah O' Donnell. Despite the difficulties of Washington Week online, Ms. O' Donnell gave a presentation that encouraged me to set goals and thrive on new challenges. It is a discussion that I'll remember for years to come.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to meet my fellow delegates in person as well as the dedicated USSYP staff that made Washington Week possible for all of us. As I look at my white chocolate dome sitting on my bedroom window ledge, I remember the wonderful memories that will follow me for years to come. While memories may fade, and USSYP experience and relationships I developed will never be forgotten. Before the USSYP opportunity, I never saw myself reaching beyond what I already knew - agriculture, small towns and big open spaces in a state that is facing a number of growing economic challenges. Now, after being introduced to several of our nation's leaders and new friends dedicated to public service, I realize my time as Wyoming's USSYP delegate was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I now have a better understanding of the options and opportunities available to me as I set my educational, career and community service goals. This year I met 104 of the best and brightest high school students in the U.S. and beyond, several of our nation's leaders and future public servants from across the nation. Thanks to the USSYP, my life has been changed forever and my future now open to even bigger possibilities.