

Adelaide Poulson, AK – 2022

I never planned on applying for the United States Senate Youth Program. Then one day as I was sharing upcoming scholarship deadlines with the National Honor Society, I came across the Heart Foundations' scholarship. A mere thirty seconds later, my phone chimed. Embarrassed, I picked it up and saw a text from my dad: "*Have you heard about the United States Senate Youth Program?*" I knew it was a sign.

Even though there were a mere three days until the deadline, I was determined to apply. The more delegate reflections I read, white chocolate domes I gazed at, and clips of the Roll Call of the States video I saw, the more intrigued I became.

Even though I originally believed the program would be held in person, I made it clear to all who asked that I was thrilled to participate, nonetheless. Pete Buttigieg? In a Zoom call? With *me*? I soon found that the virtual platform failed to cast any wisp of a shadow over the enlightenment each speaker bestowed upon our group.

My family has never been big on TV. And so, while we all deeply value the press, the majority of our information comes from typed sources. While this has led me to become active in politics and familiar with current events, it has often failed to remind me of the humanity of our politicians and government officials. One of my favorite things about the United States Senate Youth Program, therefore, was purely that it reminded me of the beauty of our representative democracy; the people that represent us *are just like us*.

Each speaker was passionate about our upcoming generation and genuinely wanted to speak with us and answer our questions. I wrote furiously throughout Washington Week, often referencing the live transcript in order to ensure that I could copy down every glorious nugget of guidance without missing anything. My notes, therefore, are brimming with quotation marks, from Justice Anthony Kennedy reflecting that "Freedom is taught, and teaching is a conscious act," to Ali Zaidi telling us that he is "betting on the young people who have blown open the sense of possibility [there] in Washington."

In addition to the powerful remarks from the speakers, I also thoroughly enjoyed interacting with the other delegates. Before the program began, I assumed I would be too tired to bother communicating with any of the other students. I live in Alaska, after all, and the time difference starts to feel a little more significant when your day is starting at 6:00 AM instead of 10:00. Instead, however, I found that waking up to texts from my fellow delegates was a source of inspiration for the upcoming day. Humorous and brilliant, the other students that I met during USSYP will forever motivate me to speak out for what I believe in, but to always value other opinions as well.

Overall, the virtual nature of the United States Senate Youth Program had no ill effect on my overall experience. I will forever value the opportunity I had to speak with a NATO official during a major world crisis, to speak with other motivated youth from around the country, and to eat delicious cookies. I highly recommend participating in the program to anyone who is considering it--even if the deadline is only a few days away.