

Loralei Cook, AZ – 2022

“America is in the fight for its life,” said Judge Robert Henry - a notion that many can resonate with. When I first became politically involved at the beginning of high school, I could feel the brusque tension that invaded every conversation, media segment, and aspect of socio-political culture. There were many people who proposed solutions to challenges and modern conflicts, but a true answer never seemed agreeable nor obtainable. And so, I became disillusioned with the current state of American politics. I chose to work within social advocacy instead, as grassroots organizations seemed to provide enough distance between the turbulent skies of Capitol Hill and myself. Yet, I still yearned to resolve the issues that plagued my community through legislation and agreement, so I was delighted to have been chosen as an Arizona delegate to the 60th annual United States Senate Youth Program.

I scattered my desk with the items graciously sent in my Welcome Box: a notebook and a pen, a miniature American flag, and the white chocolate Capitol dome positioned just behind my laptop. I turned my lamp on to the brightest setting, even though it was barely seven 'o'clock in the morning and the early March sun shone right through my window. Dressed in an H&M blazer and pajama pants (a prime example of Zoom-era fashion), I sat in my chair and nervously awaited the beginning of Washington Week. Being surrounded by 103 of some of the most intelligent students in the country, dozens of government officials, military officers, and other high-ranking personnel, it would be an understatement to say I was daunted by the week ahead of me.

Besides the wise words of Judge Henry, I had the immense privilege to hear from individuals from diverse political and government careers. Dr. Betty Koed, Historian to the United States Senate, iterated the importance of historical representation while discussing a recent project on decades of women who worked within the Senate. Former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy explored the concept of freedom and peace in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, emphasizing the “human capacity for aspiration and love that is boundless.” While discussing the roles of a leader, Ms. Vanita Gupta, Associate Attorney General, mentioned that “hope is a muscle you have to keep using,” while urging delegates to refuse to give in to despair and adversity. Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) explained the significance of building a network of support and bipartisan efforts. Finally, my favorite speaker, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield told us to always share compassion and build relationships on trust and honesty, even when the moment may seem tense.

What started as a cleverly nicknamed Snapchat group turned out to become some of the most valuable friendships I have ever made. From talking about everything from school and hobbies, to passionately debating the appropriate structure of the Senate, I spent hours within the delegate Zoom meetings. I was so enthralled by these conversations that a few other delegates and I stayed up until 2:30am one morning, unfortunately feeling the tired eyes and yawning consequences of these actions as we prepared for a whole day of speakers ahead. Though the other delegates were thousands of miles away from my bedroom, and had entirely different experiences than myself, I found them all so inspiring, thoughtful, and genuine. I realized that many of my fellow delegates will dedicate their careers to this country in brilliant ways, and for that reason, the future of this country is undoubtedly bright.

So while some may think that America is in the fight for its life, the United States Senate Youth Program encouraged me to continue serving this country with an abundance of respect, curiosity, and optimism.