

Neya Kidambi - CT

In his inaugural address, George W. Bush beautifully stated: “We are bound by ideals that teach us what it means to be citizens. Every child must be taught these ideals. Every citizen must uphold them.... I ask you to be citizens. Citizens, not spectators. Citizens, not subjects.” I firmly believe that civic education is one of the fundamental pillars of our nation. ‘We the People’ give the government its power, while making the decisions that shape our society. In order to be active citizens, we must also be informed citizens. Attending the U.S. Senate Program was the most incredible way to learn more about our nation’s government.

Being one of the 104 delegates who participated in this year’s Washington Week Online was, at the risk of sounding cliché, a dream come true. I felt honored to have been chosen as one of two delegates to represent Connecticut, and that held true from the moment I joined our first Zoom call.

While watching the Delegate Roll Call of the States during the Opening Ceremony, the smile never left my face. I have no doubt that I have met some of my best friends, and even future colleagues, through the Senate Youth Program. I am forever grateful for that.

Meeting Associate Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy was the highlight of my USSYP experience. As an aspiring attorney, I can attest that my heart was pounding in excitement for the entirety of the hour that he devoted to speaking with us. He spoke about the importance of the judiciary, and its commitment to upholding the Constitution. His discussion of the importance of jury trials was especially captivating. Jury duty is widely known for being the most avoided form of civic participation. However, Justice Kennedy described the jury as the “best judge of character”, capable of differentiating truth from falsehood. As a new adult, I am officially looking forward to being summoned for jury duty!

Senator Chris Coons of Delaware was another speaker whose words stuck with me. As a teenager, I am very passionate about cybersecurity’s convergence with upholding First Amendment rights. My own Senators, Chris Murphy and Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, have been actively involved in legislation surrounding social media. Senator Coons discussed these topics in great detail, and even mentioned a bipartisan bill that he is currently proposing, in order to mandate social media companies to reveal their algorithms to the public. I strongly believe that this is a step in the right direction, and I am extremely excited to see its impact.

Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta, Judge Robert Henry, and General Mark Milley were other speakers who led thought-provoking discussions, and truly captivated me. I learned about the role of racial bias in prosecution, the role of the judicial branch, and the future of cyberwarfare in relation to our Fourth Amendment right to privacy.

Despite participating in Washington Week virtually, I felt challenged, excited, and deeply fascinated throughout the program. Each day was perfectly organized, with interactive opportunities and gripping presentations. The Hearst Foundations, the USSYP staff, our Military Mentors, and each and every one of the speakers have undoubtedly changed my life, and I am sincerely thankful for that. I will continue to advocate for civic education, and work to uphold the pillars of our democracy.

Delegates and Distinguished Guests, thank you from the bottom of my heart.