

## **Gabriel Stephenson, DODEA – 2022**

Ten thousand dollars and a week off of school. *Not a bad deal*, I thought as I read the online description of the United States Senate Youth Program. But even more than this, I saw the incredible opportunities to meet, listen to, and speak with high-ranking politicians and others dedicated to public service, many of whom were once in our very same shoes, now striving daily to drive positive change for our country. Also, the scholarship surely didn't dissuade me from applying.

When I was told that I had been selected to participate in Washington Week 2022, I was overjoyed about the opportunity I had to learn about the government in a deeply personal way. What I did not expect was to create such special friendships and to connect with so many of my peers over our week of Zoom meetings. The chance to engage with such highly motivated, talented people of my own age has provided me with one of the most inspirational experiences of my life. At times, being around such accomplished people brought insecurity. I felt that I was underqualified for the program, and that my achievements had no value compared to those of the distinguished people around me. When I got to know my fellow delegates, however, they were incredibly kind and supportive. Their constant encouragement has strengthened and motivated me, and it has been an invaluable gift to be able to spend (mostly virtual) time with them.

Having an opportunity to speak with so many amazing people has given me more insight into how the government works and the roles of those within it. As a military child, I have been surrounded by the military for my whole life, so being able to introduce Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley was an immense honor. Each and every one of the speakers gave a unique, helpful perspective. I found myself writing down tons of notes for every speaker. In the future, I want to become an ecologist, so being able to hear from the White House Climate Advisor, Ali Zaidi, was unforgettable. His insight on environmental justice and clean energy is something which I will carry with me and use in my future work.

The amount of experience, knowledge, and insight I gained during Washington Week is unparalleled. I am very grateful for the chance I had to participate in such a special week, and it feels good knowing that I will always have these friends and connections throughout my life. I miss Washington Week, but I can't wait to see what all my fellow delegates, and I, can accomplish in the future because of this experience.