

## Pristine Thai, FL — 2022

There's half of a block of white chocolate, molded into the unmistakable shape of the Capitol dome, sitting on the top shelf of my freezer. I've been faithfully chipping away at this glorious monstrosity, as one does when they've been bestowed with such a quantity of white chocolate, and vaguely longing for the maybe-strawberry purée that seems to have accompanied it when Washington Week was held in-person. But mostly, I nostalgically long to relive the four days that the Capitol dome came with. Let me share with you why forty-odd hours of Zoom meetings was worth every minute.

What they don't tell you about the United States Senate Youth Program is that it informally begins several months before you ever hear the iconic and timeless "Delegates and distinguished guests." Everything really starts with a group chat of your fellow delegates, and getting to know their brilliant, and so relatable human, minds. This part of it is, undoubtedly, better than meeting the President of the United States. (Disclaimer: Not that I would know what meeting the President is like; things like wars understandably upend schedules. I still respectfully stand by the opinion that befriending the delegates is a superior experience.)

It was on the second day of the program that we sat with Justice Anthony Kennedy, and I sorely wished I could've actually sat with him in the gorgeously decorated room he was Zooming in from. I loved the impromptu interactive way in which he addressed us, like a conversation rather than a lecture. During our time together, I warmly remembered that Justice Kennedy wrote an opinion for the Court nearly seven years ago, concerning people like me, that ended thusly: "They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right." Seven years ago — before I understood who I was, before I discovered that immutable facet of myself, before I knew that I'd been born the very same year that acts of love were finally, mercifully decriminalized — seven years ago, Justice Kennedy saw that there was something profound about a simple and powerful thing called love. And during our time with him, he reaffirmed just that: "Love is boundless," he stressed, "and society must reckon with this fact to accommodate for our humanity." Indeed we must.

Almost a year after the memeable, global-trade-disrupting Ever Given blockage, we returned to the banks of the Suez Canal for a diplomacy simulation facilitated by the National Museum of American Diplomacy. I've never seen myself as much of a diplomat, and certainly never as one for the Soviet Union, but I thoroughly enjoyed negotiating with other delegates, and happily drew on my comrades for strength as the Western powers united against us. Only the Senate Youth could make three hours of the Suez Canal Crisis invigorating.

The last day of the program took us behind the scenes of the White House with Michael Kikukawa, a press assistant and alum of the Senate Youth Program. Being eagerly interested in rapid response communications, I was enthralled by his professional journey and his passion for his work. Michael's experiences in politics inspire me to pursue the fast-paced and fascinating work of rapid response. A glimpse into the White House press room, featuring Karine Jean-Pierre and Jen Psaki, was the icing on the cake. Michael mentioned that "it's amazing to be in the room where it happens," working with the White House press team, and I couldn't help but think that it was amazing to be in the Zoom where it happens with all of my fellow delegates.

Surprising absolutely no one who knows me, my favorite guest was the penultimate speaker: Secretary Pete Buttigieg. Though I wasn't able to ask him a question, my co-delegate Miles did, and that brought me so much pride and joy by proxy. Discussions about transportation policy

kept me hooked despite the late hour and the accumulated Zoom fatigue, but I think that what I appreciated most would be the more general life advice he offered. He stressed the perfect normality of not having a clear path charted for the next decade of your life, and how crucial adaptability is as you find your way. He shared that “as long as you have your compass set to what you care about most,” letting life take you where it will is a worthwhile exploration of where you can best serve. I’m still adjusting my compass as the world around me changes, but I have a pretty good estimation of where it’ll point in the end, and I can’t wait to follow where it leads.

It’s been more than a month since we said our final farewell over Zoom, but every day, I’m reminded of the limitless potential of my beloved delegates — and, much more importantly than their professional potential, their capacity for empathy, kindness, patience, and love. A love that I’ve been so deeply, almost undeservingly engulfed by ever since we first met. And a love I hope to continue being worthy of as we take on the world’s issues together.