

Kenny Lam, IA – 2022

Never in my four, pandemic-stricken years of high school did I ever think that I would enjoy Zoom calls. However, I'm proud to say that attending the virtual U.S. Senate Youth Program has reshaped my moral compass as both a civically engaged student and citizen.

The months leading up to Washington Week were simply chaotic. Group chats formed on Instagram and Snapchat, which were active 24/7 and eventually forced me to silence my notifications. I first met my fellow delegate from Iowa, Lexi Duffy, and others from states like Vermont, California, Georgia, and Arizona. We all came from different backgrounds, claimed different identities, and pursued different interests. The demographic makeup of our group was a perfect representation of America itself, and I was eager to exchange ideas with anyone and everyone.

Soon, gift boxes arrived and the program quickly began. My mornings were fairly routine as I brushed my teeth, took a cold shower (thanks to the advice of Judge Henry), put on a suit, and tried my best to not look sleep deprived. I then nervously waited for daily debriefings amongst my military mentor group: the Senate Youth Spartans! Lieutenant Lauren Hickey always facilitated meaningful conversations within our diverse cohort and—on another note—I found her resiliency in the male-dominated military to be admirable.

Though I unfortunately attended Washington Week at home, listening to speakers and participating in the diplomacy simulation still allowed me to understand the innerworkings of our nation's capital. Whether it was hearing from Senate Historian Betty Koed, Senator Chris Coons, or Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, I on no occasion felt disappointed by the discussions that conspired. In particular, I appreciated getting to ask Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta a question regarding her career path. As someone who went from suing the government to later representing that same government, Ms. Gupta surely has a well-versed background that enhances her ability to protect American interests. Another memorable highlight came from UN Ambassador Linda Thomas Greenfield. At such a turbulent time in regard to foreign policy and with war in Ukraine, Ambassador Thomas Greenfield graciously advised us to break barriers, diversify our experiences, and deal with issues multilaterally. Overall, the program's schedule that featured the Delegate Roll Call and Capitol Dome Open Mic Night made the process of learning feel surreal and entertaining.

Furthermore, I'm grateful that my connection to the U.S. Senate Youth Program doesn't end after Washington Week. My fellow delegates and I still chat regularly on topics ranging from political news to college plans. The Hearst Foundations' extensive alumni network allows me to stay in contact with delegates from even decades past. And I still have so many mementos to hold onto: my notebook filled with doodles, my trusty water bottle, and my bitten white chocolate dome that's sadly collecting dust in a container. Nonetheless, I am indebted to all the people that made my U.S. Senate Youth Program experience possible—which includes but is not limited to photographer Jakub Mosur, moderator Steve Cox, and director Rayne Guilford. Hearing the phrase "delegates and distinguished guests" will forever make me teary-eyed.

So, as I begin to plan my future and career aspirations, I'll keep in mind the words of National Climate Advisor Ali Zaidi to "fight for the folks who don't usually have champions." Through my participation in this one-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I've learned that students like myself can truly change the world for all and for the better; I've learned that there is hope for a more perfect union.