

Esees Komal, IL – 2022

The day was December 2nd, 2021, I had just gotten home from sports practice when my phone rang. I looked at my phone, it was a number I did not recognize, so I ignored it. I looked at my phone again, and read *Springfield, IL*, I answered. I had been selected as one of the Illinois delegates for the United States Senate Youth Program. Later that evening my grandparents called to congratulate me, my grandpa told me how proud he was and how my dad and his family had come to this country with nothing. Before I hung up he said, "Esees, go far". After Washington Week, my plans to pursue a career in public service were solidified.

Washington Week was a truly transformational experience, but for a reason most would not expect. In the margins of our pristine Senate Youth Program journals, I would analyze the leadership skills of the speakers. I studied everything from the way they interacted with students, to elucidating their ideas, and sharing their stories. After a few days of note-taking, I looked over my scribbles searching for some commonality among these leaders, and much to my surprise there was only one - passion. They all demonstrated a degree of passion that was beyond anything most of us have seen. Their full devotion to their work and putting the best interest of the country ahead of their own was what made them leaders. Great leaders are not always the products of prestigious institutions or the most eloquent speakers, but what they always are, are movers and shakers, people who see a problem and completely commit themselves to solving it. A true leader does what they believe to be best and does not shy away from criticism. Bipartisanship was an ongoing motif during Washington week. Senator Collins and Senator Coons highlighted the importance of reaching across the aisle and doing what you believe is best even when you know you will face opposition from your party. The rampant name-calling of those on the "other side" in politics has been the death of productive conversations that lead our country to heal. We as the youth must make an effort to actively bridge gaps and hear what those who have differing views from us have to say. Without listening, and caring about the perspectives of others, our democracy is in shambles.

Hearing from retired Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy was a truly remarkable experience. His wealth of knowledge and the way in which he imparted his wisdom on the subject encouraged delegates to further study our Constitution and thoroughly understand everything both implicit and explicit within. The discussion on the nuances in the reasoning and decision-making processes of the Justices was eye-opening. Since hearing from Justice Kennedy, I have begun working on an initiative in one of the youth organizations I lead to increase the Constitutional education of our members in an effort to both fill in gaps in students' civic understanding, but also to prompt critical thinking about what the Constitution stipulates. The Constitution is the governing document in our Constitutional Federal Republic, and so it is the right of the people to understand what the document outlines.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the incredible network of students and military mentors I have had the privilege of connecting with. In just a few days, I walked away feeling like I had gained another family, a family who is driven to put their all into making our nation the best it can be, and quite frankly, it is reassuring. I am endlessly grateful to the William Randolph Hearst Foundations and the United States Senate Youth Program for making this one-of-a-kind program possible!