

Lauren Wood, KY – 2022

Mic muted. Camera adjusted. Blazer straightened. Volume checked. The on-screen countdown slowly ticked down until those familiar opening words rang in the ears of 104 student delegates, all spread across the globe yet unified by one title - “delegates and distinguished guests.”

Washington Week 2022 was one for the books. Because of the virtual setting, yes, but also because of the unwavering spirit of the program despite our distance from each other. The powerful voices of our nation’s leaders came to us via Zoom rather than ringing through the hallowed halls of U.S. government buildings. Instead of trekking across DC, we trekked from our bedrooms to our kitchens and back again during break times. Yet, the quirks of this year’s Washington Week did not create an air of disappointment or a sense that we were all missing out on something greater. Rather, the uniqueness of this year’s program only reinforced an invaluable lesson that the COVID pandemic has taught us: that no barrier is strong enough to prevent us from sharing our passions, forging meaningful connections, and being inspired.

Even beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, our Washington Week occurred during a significant time in global affairs. All eyes were on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Our meetings with NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy Carmen Romero and General Mark Milley allowed us ample opportunity to share our questions about what was going on in the world and gain a greater understanding of how our global leaders are responding to this rapidly changing conflict. At home, the United States had just experienced the nomination of a new Supreme Court judge - and the first Black woman to ever hold the position. This added fascinating context to our thought-provoking discussion of the court and its principles with former Justice Anthony Kennedy. Justice Kennedy conveyed his unwavering faith in the court, even in the wake of growing partisan tensions. His willingness to engage with us directly and his desire to hear our own thoughts about the purpose of the court was an inspiring show of Kennedy’s faith in our country’s young people to be the next generation of trailblazing judicial leaders.

Although our speakers held a wide array of titles and represented diverse political ideologies, there was one common thread that ran through all of their thoughts that they shared - the importance of bipartisanship and respectful cooperation. Today, we are often confronted with dismal news headlines about partisan clashes and the seeming unattainability of compromise. Yet, if I took one thing away from Washington Week 2022, it was a renewed belief in the spirit of bipartisanship and the integrity of our democracy. As a seventeen-year-old who hopes to go into public service one day, hearing this theme from our nation’s leaders was invaluable to me.

I am incredibly thankful for the Washington Week experience. I am especially thankful for my Military Mentor group led by the incredible Lt. Commander Miller. But most of all, I am blown away by the incredible passions and talents of my fellow delegates, who brought their diverse perspectives to the week and created a welcoming environment for learning. I cannot wait to see how each of them will change the world in their own unique way.