

Anil Cacodcar, LA – 2022

When I first opened the wonderful box that the Hearst Foundations mailed to me in preparation for Washington Week, one item stood out to me above everything else, a beautiful leather-covered journal with the USSYP emblem etched on it. Over four spectacular days of Washington Week, I wrote down thirty-eight pages of notes. While I have taken many notes on subjects I am passionate about, I will cherish these the most. Within my anthology of Q&A responses, funny retorts, and doodles, I have deposited the wisdom that others have shared with me as part of the United States Senate Youth Program.

Learning about the principles of representative democracy from those who have engaged with them firsthand was enlightening. In the history of Zoom, I don't think there has ever been a more enthralling virtual program than Washington Week. While this may sound hyperbolic, I still, after over a month, cannot get over the fact that I had the incredible privilege of speaking with former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy. My AP Government teacher can only begin to describe the glee with which I told him about how Justice Kennedy quizzed me about the Constitution. This wonder that Washington Week procured within me will last a lifetime.

My excitement about learning from other people was not simply restricted to our guest speakers. I cannot express how thankful I am to have met the other USSYP delegates this year. Their diverse lived experiences, impactful accomplishments, and outstanding personalities taught me just as much about what it means to be a public servant as our guest speakers. I look forward to keeping in touch with all of them through our periodical video conference hangouts and group chat.

Washington Week has also inspired me to pursue formal studies in government at college. In a time when the experiment of democracy faces its most pressing challenges to date, I want to learn more about how we can address and overcome these obstacles. While my interests in government and civic engagement had been sparked long before Washington Week, I believe that this experience has supplied me with the fuel to burn a long-lasting flame to power my future pursuits.

The USSYP reflects the evolving nature of government and the relationships between the past, present, and future. We studied the pocket Constitutions given to us in our welcome boxes to reflect on the history of democracy, while also hearing from Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed. Simultaneously, we spoke with General Mark Milley, the nation's highest-ranking military officer, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Throughout these learning experiences, I had the opportunity to make friends with our nation's future leaders in government, science, technology, and industry. Washington Week is modeled on this evolving continuum of representative democracy from our nation's founding onward.

We also learned how to examine the deeply-entrenched problems within our nation—and how to go about fixing them. I found that Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta's role in bringing justice to Tulia, Texas was particularly inspiring. Hearing her talking about how she helped win the release of thirty-five black people who were falsely accused of crimes in a corrupt sting operation was inspiring. One part of Ms. Gupta's that stuck with me was when she emphasized that assigning blame is far easier than finding solutions.

While I cannot envision what the future will look like for me, Washington Week has left me in high spirits and has empowered me to tackle even the most difficult of challenges. As Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg told us, "it's not about the job you have, but the difference you make."