

## **Lily Cheatham, NJ – 2022**

One would believe that a worldwide pandemic would have hindered opportunities for the youth to get involved in our nation's political landscape. After having participated in the 2022 Washington Week Online Program, I can assure you this belief is far from the truth.

Never before have I been provided the opportunity to engage with such a vast array of forward-minded thinkers, creators, politicians, and world leaders until my time in this year's United States Senate Youth Program. Additionally, never before have I felt so overwhelmed with New Jersey pride. Being able to represent New Jersey with my co-delegate and engage in lengthy conversation with Senator Menendez and Senator Booker (my favorite presidential candidate from the 2020 election!!) was more than humbling. With Senator Booker, we discussed the pressing issue of political polarization in today's America and how exactly to address it. So eloquently, Booker accurately stated that, "We spend so much time demonizing each other, so much so that sitting down and having dinner with someone of opposing views feels like a betrayal of your own tribe." Senator Booker then advised my co-delegate and I to seek opportunities to have discussions with people of all different views, all different walks of life, and all different political opinions. Because it is through this engagement, that we learn to better develop our own beliefs. This, in my opinion, is the core of the duty of a USSYP delegate.

Unsurprisingly, the first instance in which I challenged myself to engage with individuals of opposing views occurred within the first few hours of the program. Senator Cory Gardner came to speak to us and delivered a thoughtful dissertation on what he believes to be the biggest threat to American democracy, and how the current legislation he's pushing for a while hopefully eases those threats. If I flip back to the first pages in my moleskin journal, I can refer to one of my favorite quotes that Senator Gardner referenced in his speech: "I am firm in my principles but flexible with the details". In referencing this quote, Senator Gardner exposed to us that he too challenges himself to stay open minded to thoughts and ideas different from his own. In that moment I felt that I achieved a common ground with the Senator despite my disagreement with some of his past supported policies, and even more so, I felt hopeful for the future of political tensions in our country should there be more congressmen who have also adopted this open mindset.

Truthfully, the Washington week experience confirmed for me exactly what I wish for my future to look like. Specifically after the conversation with Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, I have solidified that international relations is my calling. My dream is to become an intelligence analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency, applying my major in human rights studies to my work as I help strategize the most sustainable and humanitarian mode of response to international threats. I look forward to working with the United States government to better the lives of our nation's citizens and those abroad. I will take what I have learned from my Senate Youth Program experience and apply it to my work ethic as I enter a new chapter of my life attending college at Columbia University: remembering to stay firm in my principles yet flexible with the details.