

Henry Reichman, NY - 2022

Participating in the 2022 U.S. Senate Youth Program was a highlight and a true honor of my life. It was something that I had set my sights set on for a long time but did not want to get my hopes up too high. When the good news came that I would be a delegate, I immediately called my mom, my grandparents, told my favorite teachers about it, joyfully texted my friend from California who had been accepted a day prior, and celebrated with takeout.

What followed was a delightful and indelible experience that culminated in one of the best weeks of my life. Of course it seems commonplace to note that it was a shame that the pandemic skirted us onto our laptops for Washington Week and not to our capital city, but I never once thought during the week that the program was anything but stellar, even virtually. I marveled at how engaging it all was, and how each speaker had so much to say and share, and at how welcomed we all were to this historic program.

In terms of particular highlights, I have a few: one was meeting the US Army Jazz Ambassadors and nerding out with them over their jazz influences as I got to ask an enjoyable question. They played to a level I can only dream as a musician, myself. Meeting our Military Mentors and hearing their interests and thoughts really humanized the military for me. One of my favorite speakers we heard from was FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel. I was very lucky to be able to speak with her about telecommunication regulations and learn more about the relationship between the federal government and the media. She has an incredible passion for her job and explained the intricacies of it in a fascinating way. Hearing about the tasks she works on made me driven to potentially enter that field as an adult.

Every day of Washington Week there was something to look forward to. Learning about all of the growth that the USDOT is experiencing under Secretary Pete Buttigieg was very enlightening, especially with a lot of their activities being in the news at that time. With the Ukraine situation being the premier story in the world during the week, the insights and opinions that Ms. Carmen Romero from NATO brought were a truly special and timely experience that I'm so thankful was organized for us. Hearing from U.S. Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta and the work she had done within civil rights and liberties leading up to her appointment was incredible, as well.

When my laptop was closed of official Senate Youth content, the experiences of the program still felt all-immersive to me. The closeness of all of the delegates through online group chats and the affinity we all have for one another was perhaps one of the greatest experiences. I remember being so surprised on the first few days we connected that I met teenagers who had a favorite NY Times opinion columnist like I do, and ones we jokingly disliked, too. It's cliche to say that you eventually find your people, but very accurate to state that USSYP connected me with 103 cooler versions of myself from across the nation. Overall, it's not every week you meet someone who you think to yourself that you want them to be a lifelong friend, much less dozens and dozens of them in one week, so that's perhaps the greatest gift the Hearst Foundations - or anyone - could bestow on an individual.

If the discourse in our nation today could be as nice and productive as the kind in our Snapchat group chat or within our densely populated Zoom sessions, we'll be in a fantastic place. Naivete may be a fair criticism, but if we're aiming to be managing the next generation's discourse in a few decades, is it not unjustified to be optimistic?