

## **Cordelia Van der Veer, OH - 2022**

“Delegates and distinguished guests, I welcome you to the 60th Annual 2022 United State Senate Youth Program.”

With Mr. Cox’s words, a week filled with engaging speakers, thoughtful questions, spirited conversations, and cookie-eating commenced. Between the packed schedule of activities and events, as well as unofficial Zoom debriefs, I could hardly process my excitement. It wasn’t until Thursday night that I reflected on how much the program meant to me.

I thought back to when I first learned about USSYP, the somewhat stressful application process, the joy I felt when I read the congratulatory email, and my surprise when a giant box of USSYP goodies showed up at my doorstep. I remembered how I (virtually) met my co-delegate Saron and how we instantly formed a bond.

Prior to Washington Week, Saron and I had a meeting with Senator Robert Portman, who discussed the highs and lows of life as an elected official. Our 15 minutes with Senator Portman were a surreal experience; if you had told me six months ago that I would have a private meeting with a senator, I would not have believed you. Senator Portman’s insights were a taste of the caliber of speakers we would meet in March.

Between the Senator Portman meeting and Washington Week, I became friends with delegates from across the country, each one more accomplished and more friendly than the next. We hyped each other up after advocacy wins, celebrated college acceptances, and even met in person for tacos. I know my connections with other delegates will be a lifelong resource, and I cannot help wondering which delegates will become senators, who will decide to join the foreign service, and if I met any future presidents.

Before I knew it, it was March 5 and Washington Week began. I was introduced to my military mentor and the other delegates in my group. Lieutenant Commander Megan Concepcion and the so-called “Declaration Thieves” became my core support system. After each session, we shared our thoughts on the speakers and compared notes from our blue leather USSYP journals. The Declaration Thieves’ favorite speakers included Justice Anthony Kennedy, Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta, and Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg. We also enjoyed learning about the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and became too invested in the diplomacy activity.

Personally, I found Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Michael Kikukawa, and Justice Anthony Kennedy particularly engaging. It was an absolute honor to give the closing remarks for the Ambassador’s speech. Her words empowered me to consider a career with the United Nations. When Michael Kikukawa spoke, I felt like I was listening to a character from *The West Wing*. From his stories about Dr. Biden’s jump scares to the impromptu virtual tour of the White House Press Room (including a cameo appearance by Press Secretary Jen Psaki), Mr. Kikukawa humanized the White House. Justice Kennedy’s remarks were different from what I expected. He directly addressed delegates and asked us for our perspective on the constitution.

Although the speakers’ remarks lasted only a few minutes and Washington Week lasted only five days, I foresee it having a lifelong impact on my career aspirations, friendships, and overall perspective on government. Despite the virtual nature of the program, I believe the USSYP staff did a stellar job connecting us — even from afar — to our fellow delegates and to the world of Washington, D.C.