

## Aishwarya Swamidurai, OK – 2022

“A week not in Washington,” I thought. “Yet the name Washington Week stays”

The above outlines the very thoughts I had ever since the announcement was made that the 2022 USSYP Washington Week would be online. Was I governed by expectations I held based off the various brochures, flyers, and websites of USSYP? Honestly, yes. Did the experience I have exceed anything I could have ever even dreamt of in the best way? Most certainly. Very quickly, I learned that what epitomizes the annual United States Senate Youth Program is most certainly NOT its presence in Washington D.C., but rather, its presence in the hearts and minds of those who embody it, each and every “delegate and distinguished guest” as Major Steve Cox would say. This year’s Washington Week ONLINE was a week of insight into Washington D.C., and so much more. And for such an experience filled with such growth and learning, I am forever grateful.

The anticipation grew in fervor as the month before Washington Week hit. As we received our Welcome Boxes, beautifully assembled with so much care and thought, I wondered at just what was in store for me. The making of the Roll Call video allowed me to engage with my amazing co-delegate and the group chats and meetups allowed my fellow delegates and I to learn about our respective passions and individualism.

The virtual programming itself was nothing short of enlightening. Engaging and experienced speakers such as U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Senator Chris Coons, Dr. Betty Koed, Associate SCOTUS Justice Anthony Kennedy provided invaluable insight into what it meant to live and breathe public service. An impromptu tour of the White House with Michael Kikukawa or immensely talented military instrumental groups only added to that experience. When I served as Egypt in the international diplomacy simulation, I understood the ramifications of needing to be heard and seen through peace, not violent victory. And our military mentor groups.....oh man, what can I say about our Military Mentor groups without enthusedly shouting out my wonderful military mentor Lt. Hickey and the Senate Youth Spartans. Our daily debriefs were filled with wonderful insights, jokes about Roombas, and beautiful moments of bonding. Military mentors were one of those things I certainly did not know I needed, but definitely felt my USSYP experience couldn’t be as great without.

I conclude with my opening thought, on a week not in Washington named Washington Week. If USSYP taught me anything, it’s this. Our government and political processes are solely ours and thus, reside innately with the people. Washington D.C., the White House, the Capitol, and everything that marks this American democracy - it all can live within each and everyone of us should we choose so, in our actions, our discourse, our drive - the very drive to make the world a better place through public service. On Capitol Open Mic Night, I heard a fellow delegate of mine mention that to them, the Capitol meant home. And to me, that home is USSYP. Whether or not I make it to Washington one day, I know I can live through it and serve through if I dedicate myself to the ideals of government and politics that I have always been so passionate about. To always be in Washington without, perhaps, always being in Washington.