

Caroline Gao, OR - 2022

“All history is revisionist history.” Senate Historian Betty Koed shared these words with us on the second day of Washington Week, and they’ve stuck with me ever since. Even now, as I reflect back on my incredible USSYP journey, I’m conscious that my perspective may be tinted rose by the lens of nostalgia. Regardless of how I now hold the experience in my memory, I know that USSYP has undoubtedly and indelibly shaped my perspective on politics, my future, and the value of hope.

One of my favorite aspects of Washington Week was how it humanized seemingly untouchable political figures. During Washington Week, I got to hear Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg talk about how he adored being introduced as Penelope and Gus’s father, and how he bought his first suit to attend Washington Week in 2000 as an Indiana delegate. I’ve idolized Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield for years, but I learned for the first time during her session that she sometimes gets nervous before major UN addresses or critical diplomatic meetings, the same way an ordinary person like me gets nervous before asking our distinguished speakers a question. During the Oregon delegate calls with Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, seeing the family photos framed in their offices and hearing about their exhausting work and travel schedules reminded me of the personal sacrifices that public servants make to better our whole community.

Hearing my political role models describe their personal journeys felt organic in a way official bios simply cannot capture. For me, those authentic human stories were just as important as the rich policy perspectives our speakers shared. Indeed, seeing the human behind the position left me more comfortable envisioning my own potential future in elected office.

Through Washington Week, I also discovered a newfound interest in judicial professions. Previously, I had considered myself fairly set on pursuing a career in diplomacy or policymaking. However, interacting with speakers like Justice Anthony Kennedy and learning firsthand about his interpretations of the Constitution provided me a wholly new perspective on the complexity, beauty, and power of judicial philosophies. As the daughter of Chinese immigrants, I particularly valued hearing from Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta. Learning about her story helped me realize the paths in the legal field that have already been and continue to be trailblazed by Asian women. Ultimately, USSYP expanded my vision of public service and where I might fit within it. After all, as Secretary Buttigieg stated, public service isn’t about the “job you want to have, but the impact you want to make.”

Discussion of Washington Week would be incomplete without mentioning my fellow delegates, who are easily among the most passionate, intelligent, well-spoken people I’ve ever met. It is truly an honor to be part of this collaborative community of poets, policy wonks, and future presidents. Whether we were simulating the Suez Canal crisis or discussing how ranked-choice voting could help reduce polarization, I was constantly amazed by the depth and diversity of knowledge my fellow delegates possessed. I was also amazed by how close we grew not just as co-delegates, but also as friends. From flooding the Zoom chat like first-graders during our final debrief session, to filling our #wordle-wall Discord channel with our lexical trials and triumphs, I will always cherish the memories we make together each day.

Above all, my biggest takeaway from Washington Week is hope. I have renewed hope for our future because I’m now lucky enough to consider our future leaders my friends. I know how brilliant, empathetic, and driven we are, and I can’t wait to see how we change the world together. I also have renewed hope for our present because I’ve met the public servants forging onward every day on the arduous, necessary path toward a more perfect union — not as political figureheads, but as individual human beings.

As Deputy White House National Climate Advisor and USSYP alum Ali Zaidi said, I've had to figuratively "win the lottery" many times to have the opportunity to serve as a Senate Youth delegate. Now, it's time for me to pay that experience forward. Thanks to the hope, inspiration, and knowledge I've gained from USSYP, I'm happy to say I've become a better leader, friend, and human being for every present and future community I serve.