

## **Aditya Bhatt, SC - 2022**

My Washington Week experience is one that will forever impact the course of my life from here on forward. I will never forget the call that I received from the SC Superintendent of Education, Mrs. Molly Spearman — how I was called down to the principal's office to learn that I was the first student from my school to be a part of the U.S. Senate Youth Program. Despite the fact that Washington Week would be virtual, I eagerly waited for its commencement, reaching out to fellow delegates and starting to form the relationships that I now realize will last a lifetime. When I received my welcome box, I was overjoyed by the level of thought and care that went into each USSYP sponsored item that my fellow delegates and I would excitedly use in the week to come.

I clearly remember waking up early on the first day of Washington Week, Sunday, March 6th, to make sure my zoom setup looked good. On the first page of my USSYP journal, I wrote the number for the urgent technical helpline as I listened to Mr. Steve Cox set the ground rules for the program events to come. I enjoyed watching the Roll Call of the States, with videos from delegates around the country introducing themselves and their home states. The military mentor group that I would soon be broken into consisted of delegates and a mentor with whom I shared deep and meaningful conversations throughout the week and beyond. Through them, I learned about the vast and varying issues, from rising water levels in DC and smoke in Nevada, that my home state of South Carolina did not experience firsthand. That first day felt like a blur, but the creative online delivery of the Mt. Vernon tour and the speech from USSYP alumnus and former Senator Cory Gardner resonated with me and set the scene for the remainder of the week.

On the second day of Washington Week we listened to Senate Historian Dr. Betty Koed talk about three influential senators throughout American history — Edward Costigan, William Proxmire, and Carol Moseley Braun — and the lasting impact that they had on the Senate as well as the American people. I will never forget the conversation that I got to have with former Justice Anthony Kennedy, a surreal experience that I wouldn't have gotten if it weren't for the USSYP. At the end of the day, we listened to Senator Susan Collins of Maine, another USSYP alumna, and her message on bipartisanship, especially important in these divided times.

What was special about this year's USSYP was that it was held during a tumultuous time in the world, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the top of everyone's mind. It was during this chaotic situation that delegates got the chance to hear from key individuals on the forefront of finding solutions to the problem. We met with NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General Carmen Romero and listened to her talk about the history of NATO and the role that it plays in this conflict. We heard from UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield speak about her global experiences as well as the stressful situations that she often encounters working at the United Nations. We were lucky to also get the chance to hear from General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who himself was preoccupied with the rapid developments of the conflict, and yet made sure to take the time to talk with us, whom he believes in to solve the problems of today in order to forge a better future.

Whether it was the diplomacy simulation that we got to do through the National Museum of American Diplomacy or the speech that we got from notable individuals like Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg. Whether it be the behind-the-scenes perspective that we got into the White House, or just listening to the forever iconic "Delegates and Distinguished Guests" from Major Cox, the memories that I made and experiences that I had during Washington Week will truly last with me forever. To the delegates of the 60th anniversary of the United States Senate Youth Program and especially to the people who made it possible, you have my immense gratitude.