

Grace Enz, SD – 2022

Participating in the United States Senate Youth Program Washington Week has changed my life. Despite not being able to travel to Washington D.C., I feel that the online program brought a new, equally valuable perspective to my role in a democratic society. It was enlightening to interact with such passionate and intelligent individuals from across the United States and discuss critical national and global issues. I was inspired by the speakers' experiences and my fellow delegates' activism in their local communities.

The small group meetings with Military Mentors were one of my favorite parts of Washington Week. My Military Mentor did a fantastic job of highlighting both sides of an issue and sharing new information. He would often send articles relating to a topic mentioned by one of the speakers so that we could read more about it. Due to our discussion on the current polarization in news media and general misinformation, I decided to start my mornings by reading a news article from sources I was previously unaware of or not accustomed to reading. Through USSYP, I have learned the importance of knowledge and research in fueling opinions. When the delegates in my group disagreed, they would back up their arguments with facts from articles and consider the alternative viewpoint. With the current divisive political environment, it was refreshing to respectfully debate topics and try to understand the reasoning behind opposing beliefs.

I learned from all the speakers, but the opportunity to listen to U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield was an incredible honor. As someone who aspires to pursue a career in the U.S. Foreign Service, I deeply value her perspectives. I especially appreciated Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield's focus on the importance of building relationships—not only with one's allies but also one's adversaries—in the promotion of diplomacy. I believe that this viewpoint is crucial, especially during these divisive times in our nation and world. Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield emphasized the role of young people in becoming leaders who create hope and a world that is safe and prosperous for all. She serves as a role model for positive change, and I hope to be as beneficial to my community as she is to our nation.

Washington Week has solidified my commitment to public service. The events, speakers, and my fellow delegates reminded me of the importance of spreading kindness and showing respect to everyone despite differences and how even the smallest gesture can have a widespread effect. I started Washington Week feeling somewhat overwhelmed by all of the issues that are affecting the United States and unsure of how I can play a role. However, after the many hours listening to speakers such as U.S. Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta and Associate Justice to the Supreme Court Anthony Kennedy, I feel inspired to make an impact little by little.

I am grateful to the United States Senate Youth Program for organizing such important and engaging sessions that allowed me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of our nation's government. It was an incredible honor to represent South Dakota as a delegate, and I look forward to a career in public service now more than ever.