

Biftu Regaa, TN – 2022

I applied to the Senate Youth Program with no idea of what it was. Intrigued at the possibility of meeting other students equally passionate about politics and hesitantly, I applied. From growing vaccine distrust in my hometown to challenges in our courts about voting rights legislation, I felt incapable of acknowledging society's problems and holding open and diverse discussions with my peers. Though I was hopeful the Senate Program would give me the opportunity to become a strong leader and grow my understanding of political issues, I was wary of how meaningful it would be in a virtual setting. From the Slack group created at the beginning of the program to our zoom hangouts, I felt like fresh air was breathed into me as I engaged with other high schoolers who were also finding their way amongst the cacophony of noise and confusion that makes up our political space.

In our military mentor groups, I was able to reflect on and analyze the messages of the distinguished speakers in a setting that was comfortable and open. As we shared our different takeaways, I was able to gain deeper insight into how issues like climate change, broadband access, or healthcare inequality translated from the speaker's governmental view into its actual presence in our communities. My peers would bring up points and additions to each message that often left me intrigued and even more confused - in a good way! I value their perspectives and believe that I am a better person for having the privilege to listen to their ideas. These lively discussions were enhanced by my amazing military mentor - Captain Dryhurst (Dryhearth Foundation forever!) who made sure we stayed on track and guided us through tough discussions. Though we've left the utopia of Washington Week, the bonds we formed are unbreakable, and I'm so glad I have family that I can visit when I'm in D.C.

I came to Washington Week with a strong passion for criminal justice and public health reform. As a future health professional, I wanted to hear from and ask our nation's top leaders questions about inequities in the healthcare system and steps we can take to change it. Interestingly enough, what piqued my interest the most during this time was hearing FCC chairwoman Ms. Rosenworcel talk about the FTC and FCC's major role in regulating the internet and airwaves based on its tenets of diversity, localism, and competition. From working to provide quality internet access to rural communities, using airwave data for effective military communication and function, and even trying to stop the spread of annoying robocalls, I didn't realize how broad and tangible the FCC's effect was in my everyday life. Additionally, as a student in a rural community, internet access is a real problem that affected many of my classmates during the pandemic. Hearing Ms. Rosenworcel say that the FCC is committed to providing equity in technology was refreshing and has inspired me to do more work in understanding this complex issue to advocate for more change in my school department. Not only did Ms. Rosenworcel present poignant information, the questions asked by my fellow delegates were very complex and new to me - I was often googling what they asked while also listening to the speaker's response! From this session, I've been reading about laws like the Fairness doctrine and have developed a stronger knowledge of the technology industry and the complexities of its role in our current age.

Though each session at Washington Week was different and covered different governmental departments and national issues, a common theme I took away from the program was the importance of partnership. As I heard the NATO Assistant Secretary talk about the importance of allies in strengthening democracy, Major General Isaacson talk about the competitive advantage partnerships give in Cyber Security and innovation, and Senator Gardner inspiring us to be 'firm on the principles but flexible on the details,' I have left the Senate program with a new sense of purpose to engage in uncomfortable conversations and spend more time working with those I believe differently from. No matter how unfair and divisive our world is, I'm renewed with the belief that my responsibility to reach across the aisle and enact change should never diminish.