

Eva Frazier, VT – 2022

I logged onto my computer in one of the conference rooms of my school library. On the zoom meeting staring across from me, was Senator Leahy, the President *Pro-Tempore* of the Senate, and Vermont's most senior Senator who is entering his final year of service. The thirty minutes following our initial introductions were nothing short of transformational, motivational, and beyond anything I could have ever imagined when I first started exploring and understanding the political world around me.

Senator Leahy, who stepped out of a crucial budgetary meeting for more than half an hour to speak with me and Iris Hsiang, left me with his own words that embodied the previous week's experience prior to our meeting on March 10th. Iris asked him what changes he as a Senator has noticed in the state of Vermont over his decades of service. He responded with commentary on Vermont's growing diversity, something the state has lagged behind in as other areas of the United States have become cultural melting pots. Senator Leahy responded, "Diversity is what makes us great." He encouraged both Iris and me to continue our work in advancing racial justice and to never give up fighting for a more welcoming, and equitable America. After expressing "how proud he was to be a Vermonter after meeting us," I left the meeting teary, moved by the Senator's compassion, and the care he took to encourage Iris and me to continue to follow our dreams and eventually return to better the State of Vermont.

Prior to our meeting, Iris and I, along with 102 other high school delegates from every U.S. state, the District of Columbia, and the DoDEA, had been pushed to do exactly what Senator Leahy had demanded - to better our communities, and never back down from our dreams by participating in a four-day virtual Washington Week. Reflecting upon the incredible experience of the 60th annual Washington Week, run by the Hearst Foundations, Senator Leahy's assurance that diversity is what makes us great, stays with me as a core message supported by every aspect of our Washington Week online.

We as delegates had the privilege to hear from Senator Collins, one of the keynote speakers, who also delivered and expressed this message. At Washington Week 2022 she spoke on how life-changing her own USSYP experience was, and how as an alumna of the very same program we all were experiencing, she envisioned her future in ways she never could have, as a young woman from a rural state. The significance of her keynote address, which occurred on International Women's Day, was not lost on me. As a young woman from a rural state, I was inspired and motivated by her speech to continue to pursue excellence in both my academic and professional career, despite the social standards for women. Senator Collins also commented on "how happy she was to see a record number of female participants" in this year's USSYP. As I clicked through my zoom screens, the diversity of the young women participating in the same program as myself stared back at me. Different states, beliefs, backgrounds, and upbringings, but here we all were, setting new participatory benchmarks with collective power, and learning from such an influential woman in the process.

Upon reflecting on that night's presentation, Senator Leahy's words rang true again. At the end of each day of the program, we engaged in debate and discussion around the amazing sessions we had participated in throughout the day. Broken into small groups with a military mentor, we were able to review and contemplate the activities and learnings of the day. Another form of diversity shone through here; diversity of thought. In these small groups, I was able to learn and listen to nine other delegates and my military mentor, who all had unique perspectives on every topic brought up during the week. As underscored throughout the week, by many of the keynote speakers, part of public service is listening and trying to understand where differing views come from. To me, nothing exemplified the crucial cornerstone of our democracy more than in the discussions my military mentor group engaged with when differences

arose. I and the other delegates would often explain what part of our unique backgrounds had led to this place; hearing about the variety of lived experiences contributing to the diversity of ideas in the zoom room was one of the most eye-opening and engaging moments for me of Washington Week 2022.

Finally, the diversity that supports our great nation was further demonstrated as several delegates spoke on what the Capitol means to them, during the symbolic White Chocolate Capitol Ceremony. Though excited to finally try the long-awaited White Chocolate Capitol's dome, the moving and passionate speeches, poems, and reflections provided by my fellow delegates made the ceremony an incredibly patriotic and unifying night. For some, the Capitol represented a place of hope, the significance of the American dream. For others, a place that holds us accountable to right the injustices currently present in this country. The spirit of our guiding principles - Liberty and Justice for All - permeated every second of that night. The All, in that clause, rising to the front. Just as Senator Leahy imparted to Iris and me the day after Washington Week's conclusion, diversity is what makes us great. Diversity is the unifying force of America, of the American people, and at the core of every experience I and my fellow delegates had at the once-in-a-lifetime Washington Week 2022 program.

Now, as I plan to leave Vermont to continue my education, Senator Leahy's words, and the experiences of Washington Week that exemplified them, will guide me as I seek to better my community and my country, by honoring and working to understand the diversity of every person under the star-spangled banner.