

Anna Walter, WV - 2022

Though my Washington Week was not in the format I was expecting, I have found beauty in that. With almost of two years of COVID I was hopeful for an in-person Washington Week. After the announcement of going virtual, I had concerns about being able to gain the most from the experience. Little did I know I would have absolutely nothing to worry about.

From the moment I logged on to meet my military mentor group, who quickly became my family, I knew I was surrounded by people who shared some of the same burning passions as me. As we did introductions, I learned just how unique everyone was but that we all shared the common interest of improving our nation and world. It was amazing to learn about everyone as the week progressed. I learned some of the most meniscal things such as favorite foods to the most amazing things such as the story of their lives. As a person whose parents taught them to walk a mile in someone else's shoes before casting judgment, I feel as though this was the perfect experience to learn and grow from. Just as a family would, we learned from one another and always had looked out for one another. Ending the exciting but long and tiring day with my mentor group was arguably one of the most amazing parts. There were always plenty of words of encouragement and inspiration to go around, as well as discussing some of the amazing speakers and how we feel as though we were offered a new perception.

Being online allowed us to hear from many prestigious speakers who may not traditionally be able to speak with us. We heard from idols such as Vanita Gupta, Justice Kennedy, NATO, and Secretary Buttigieg. In a time where major world events are happening such as the Ukrainian war, a pandemic, and many other foreign and domestic affairs, being able to hear from the people who are actively working to solve these issues was an honor and a privilege. While I would never wish for any of those affairs to occur, to be granted the opportunity to learn more about them from insiders' perspective was truly remarkable. I felt as though I was contributing to a large piece of history that has yet to be written in the books. As a person who is interested in the environment, it was amazing to hear from Secretary Buttigieg. It was even more of an honor to be one of the few people to be able to ask him a question. Hearing his response for brining ecofriendly transportation options to rural areas with limited access gave me both hope for the future and a new perspective on how it can be accomplished. What also amazed me was just how human these leaders are. We often forget that there is a person behind the rigorous role. It can be easy to become frustrated with how things are progressing in the world but having candid sessions with leaders from a wide range of backgrounds, aided in understanding that they are people too who have our country's best interest at heart. Regardless of their background or status, they all had a shared sense of hope, encouragement, and admiration for the next generation of leaders.

As I sit here and reflect on my week, I realize just how much I grew as a person in such a short amount of time. I often think about Senator Manchin's quote about being given the opportunity and how the best thing we could do is prove to them that they made the right choice. While I was not able to get to know everyone as much as I had hoped to, I can rest assured that every state had selected the proper delegates. I will never forget my time as the 60th annual United States Senate Youth Program delegate, and just like all the speakers, I have found hope, encouragement, and admiration for the next generation of leaders.