

## **Cameron Reckard, WY - 2022**

Living in Wyoming provides a number of unique opportunities, but it also tends to lead to a sense of isolation within the community. As a high school student looking to understand the variety of life in the country, the United States Senate Youth Program provided a unique opportunity to connect with students from across the country who are also passionate about learning more about our country (plus two from other countries), as well as officials from across the world that help everything to function on a day-to-day basis.

These individuals formed a massive part of the program. What other experience allows for Juniors and Seniors in High School to ask questions to individuals like military generals, international diplomats, and even the Secretary of Transportation? These question and answer periods allowed myself and others an in-depth look into what it means to be in these important positions and helped to shape my view of the world. A clear highlight was talking with a representative from NATO about the unfolding situation in Ukraine and learning about the duties of being a delegate to the United Nations from someone who lives it every day. I left each of these Zoom calls with a new concept, perspective, or theory about the nation we call home, and I was blown away by the caliber and quality of each and every interview.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a tremendous impact on my time at Washington Week, turning our scheduled in-person event into one through a screen. I would be lying if I said I was not disappointed, but I was impressed by the flexibility of the program staff in pivoting the entire program to a virtual setting while still retaining the impact of the experience for the delegates. I can safely say that the virtual program was still life-changing in its own way, even allowing me a chance to meet with each of my home state Senators on a much more personal level than would otherwise be possible.

Of course, no description of the program would be complete without mentioning the relationships I built during Washington Week Online. I will forever remember our late-night Zoom Hangout sessions after the day's events had concluded, our video chats during breaks, and even our special superlative ceremony held afterwards. Virtually connecting with 103 of the best and brightest minds in the United States (and the DoDEA) was an inspiring experience for me, encouraging me to push further each and every day. Each and every one of them are incredible individuals, and I am honored to be one of their fellow members of the USSYP Class of 2022.

To anyone who is interested in applying for the program, I have one piece of advice: DO IT! Washington Week blew me away from the first moment on Zoom to the last evening of good-byes. As a participant in the USSYP, you gain connections that will easily last a lifetime and an experience unrivaled by any other in the nation. The USSYP forever impacted my view of the world and encouraged me to think of everything in a broader perspective, and I could not recommend it more.