

Kara Dugan, NC – 2023

A recurring theme of my Washington Week experience was the phenomenon of imposter syndrome. From the moment I received the email confirming my position as one of North Carolina's delegates for the 2023 session, I was questioning my place within the program. Then, with the formation of an Instagram account introducing the 103 other delegates I would be meeting, the feeling of inadequacy heightened. My fellow delegates had the most impressive résumés my generation has to offer. From their introductory posts, I expected to feel out of place. However, my experience at Washington Week only proved to me that I am not an imposter and that the greatest gifts my fellow delegates and I have to offer are our uniqueness and diversity of thought. From my fellow delegates, our Military Mentors, the guest speakers, and my own personal growth, the biggest takeaway from my Washington Week experience is humility.

During Washington Week, I had the opportunity to listen to and observe some of the most prominent names in the American government. Among these names were Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Senate Minority Whip John Thune, and U.S. Surgeon General. Dr. Vivek H. Murthy. These names and titles come with authority and power. I have grown up in a political climate where any name of prominence in government crosses headlines daily for scandal, controversy, or public appearances. As a result of name recognition, I anticipated that our guest speakers would be unable to relate to a group of high school students. However, what I quickly observed from every guest speaker was their shared humility. Every speaker, regardless of status, expressed their desire to serve the public, not a desire to grasp power. The genuine concern our speakers had regarding the people of our nation was the most moving aspect of Washington Week. Prior to Washington Week, I had only known politicians for their accomplishments and moments in the news. After Washington Week, I now know that those who serve in government truly define what it means to be a public servant, a mindset I hope to emulate in my future career.

Hearing our guest speakers admit to their own feelings of imposter syndrome and experiencing their humility was an opportunity for my fellow delegates and me to share their feelings. It did not take long for me to realize that even the delegates with the most decorated résumés felt inadequate to be a United States Senate Youth Program delegate. However, with each confession of feeling insufficient came the reassurance of 103 future leaders. While I was able to learn from the humility and wisdom of our nation's leaders, it was from the next generation of leaders that I learned the most during Washington Week. My fellow delegates expanded my perspective on the future of government. Fellow delegates' career plans ranged from the role of government in the development of artificial intelligence to the legislative reform of our nation's healthcare system. It was from the aspirations of my fellow delegates that I learned I was meant to be at Washington Week, not because of my résumé, but because of my individuality, a character trait that our guest speakers and military mentors told us defines an effective leader.

Washington Week was an eventful week of constant learning. However, I did not only learn about the operation of our government as I had anticipated. Instead, I learned how to be humble while still remaining confident. While one must be proud of their accomplishments in life, a true public servant is not proud of the length of their résumés but rather proud of how they have served others.