

## **Cindy Aguilar-Castaneda, CA – 2019**

Walking into unfamiliar territory can be scary. But when I arrived to the Mayflower I was immediately reminded of my purpose for public service. As I was finishing my dinner (which happened to be Mexican food!), a lady came over to pick up my empty plate. When she came by, I said, “Muchas Gracias.” To which she initially responded to with a glowing face and smile.

She later congratulated me for being one of the two Latinas, she told me about her journey as an immigrant from Venezuela, and she said she was honored that I was representing the Latinx community. It’s hard to explain how important her words were to me, but it was like she was hugging me with her words.

Not many people in politics look like me, but in that moment, as her words embraced me, I realized that I get the opportunity to create a ripple effect that inspires young Latinas in my community to be self and community advocates.

I come from a town that doesn’t usually get represented, a community that sometimes gets lost and overshadowed by larger cities who are continuously thriving. So being the delegate representing the diverse state of California--and most importantly, my hometown, the “small town with a big heart,” Gonzales, was an immense honor.

As I engaged in meaningful dialogue about the nation's most pressing issues with the nation's top high school students, I was constantly aware of all the communities I represent. I was there sharing the stories of the resilient people who’ve shaped my community and state: immigrants, people of color, the Latinx community, and all the people who’ve never advocated for themselves due to language barriers or fear.

The best part without a doubt was meeting one hundred and three new friends. No moment was awkward and every conversation was very emotional or engaging. I’ve truly never experienced something like this and I genuinely feel more empowered than ever to change the world and to run D.C. alongside my peers.

I got to experience things that the women in my family have never had the privilege of doing. Whether it was eating dinner next to the U.S. Constitution, meeting Supreme Court Chief Justice Roberts, having an interesting moment as we met President Trump, or simply singing on the bus, every experience was life changing.

I am immensely thankful to our military mentors who redefined what it means to serve, care, and work with discipline. Thank you for sharing your stories and for choosing to mentor us. I am in awe with every single one of you.

To my peers, it was an honor meeting you. You are all so resilient and worthy of all the good things that come your way. Thank you for listening to me and for reaffirming that watching C-Span and listening to political debates for fun is, well, actually normal.

Special appreciation to Lexi Padilla-Rodriguez and Joshua Garay: Gracias por ser los grandes seres que son. Conocerlos fue uno de los mejores momentos que viví durante esta experiencia. Tenerlos a mi lado me dio la fortaleza que necesitaba para compartir las historias de nuestra cultura. Su dedicación y valentía me inspira todos los días. Ahora a cambiar el mundo, si se puede!