

Cindy Chen, CA – 2026

When I first began my application for the United States Senate Youth Program, I knew two things: I wanted this more than anything I had ever pursued—and that, in the most competitive and populous state in the country, there was no way I would actually receive the delegate spot.

So, when I sat down at my desk to finish my application, with only two hours left on the clock, I decided to risk it all and scrap everything I had prepared. In my new essays, I decided to leave behind all my premonitions of what the program expected of me, and just tell my truth. I wrote about being a green card holder and an immigrant—even though that identity had disqualified me from countless opportunities before. I wrote about the quiet trauma carried within the Asian American community and all the questions I lacked answers to. I wrote, with honesty, that I had never been given an opportunity like this—that I wasn't a Girls Nation delegate or a Senate Page—but that I had a perspective that ached to be shared.

The week that finalist notifications were released, I did not receive any emails. Crushed, I told myself that it had always been a long shot, and decided to sleep my troubles away—until a phone call jolted me awake from an after-school nap. I missed it, but when I listened to the voicemail, I shot straight out of bed. Because of a system error, I had never received the email...but I was a finalist.

With less than ten hours before my interview, I suddenly had a chance.

Before I knew it, I found myself arriving at Washington Week—equally nervous and excited. This was the opportunity of a lifetime, and I didn't want to mess it up. As an immigrant student coming from a working class family, I found myself in some of the most important rooms in our country—rooms I had been captivated by my entire life, but could never imagine myself standing in.

I was surrounded by students who had been to D.C. countless times—some who had lived there, others who had served as Senate Pages. Many seemed born into public service, or had intricate and extraordinary stories and motivations. Meanwhile, my parents didn't speak English, my family despised politics, and everything I knew came solely from grassroots work, on the ground. I felt that I had arrived at the Mayflower by accident.

Despite being a proud public speaker my entire life, I spent the first few days completely paralyzed. I was terrified to ask questions, afraid that I'd mess up or that someone else would have something sharper or smarter. Although I had introduced myself to everyone, I still felt awkward and disconnected.

But eventually—after a long dinner conversation—I realized I wasn't alone. Everyone, no matter how impressive they seemed, felt the same uncertainty I did. And, slowly, I realized there was no "right" way to do Washington Week.

"What will you do with your one wild and precious life?"

I decided to live Washington Week unapologetically, refusing to let a single moment or connection pass me by.

I spent an hour talking foreign policy with a Navy SEAL. I found out that Rachel Scott and I came from the same hometown. I got to fangirl over Justice Jackson with all the girls on my coach. And, of course, I bonded with my roommate—from the other side of the political aisle—over our shared love of heels as short girls (which, ironically, were banned).

And before long, I found my people—for the first time in my life. I was surrounded with friends unlike anyone I had ever met back home. Delegates who were uniquely kind and unapologetically ambitious, deeply curious, opinionated about the most niche subjects, and united by a true love for humanity. I met people from all over the nation who were so much like me, yet so different.

They are the kind of people that I know I will hold close for the rest of my life, despite the geographical distance—friends that filled an absence that I hadn't fully recognized, a lack of community I had grown so used to that I didn't realize how deeply I had been missing it.

I learned a lot about how the government functions. I saw the pillars of the Supreme Court up close, sat in rooms I had only ever seen on C-SPAN recordings, and listened to leaders that I had studied for years. But more importantly, between the bus ride conversations, late night (off-tune) karaoke sessions, and all the questions we asked, I found something else.

Hope for myself—and hope for a more perfect union.

For the first time, it all felt possible. I hadn't arrived at the Mayflower by accident. I was meant to be there. Not in spite of where I came from, or what I carried, but because of it.

Thank you to the United States Senate Youth Program, for instilling in me dazzling new dreams—and D.C. will definitely be seeing me again soon.