

## Omy Patel, FL - 2026

“Pound it!”

To anyone reading these essays while anxiously waiting for their state’s delegate decisions, you will have zero idea what my introduction meant. However, to my coach and my three ride-or-dies, that one was just for you.

Exactly one month ago, in the bustling Sarasota airport, I was anxiously waiting for my flight to board. Wearing a sweater, sweatpants, and two AirPods, I looked dialed in, but in reality, I was nervous. As my hype song, “Judas,” blared through my AirPods, I imagined my peers as startup wizards and the cousins you always get compared to. I had been the most active delegate on Instagram before we arrived, so some people knew me before I got to know them. Letting that weigh on me only made my nerves worse.

Unfortunately, those nerves stayed with me for the whole flight—through takeoff, turbulence, and the final descent into Washington.

Then I entered the airport.

Sparkling glass panes, embroidered walls, and vaulted ceilings made it feel almost magical. As I stepped outside, the air was warm and thick. In the heart of Virginia, history hung in the atmosphere, with politics embedded in every building. On the bus, I practically glued my face to the window, watching the city pass by.

I am actually here.

The hotel was the finest I had ever walked into. Waiting inside was Mexican food night: a full banquet, with the aroma of spices filling the room. That was where I finally found Rowan Kozminski, the guy I had spent winter break grinding Fortnite with across state lines. Poor guy had lost his luggage at the airport. But he was still so enthusiastic, and that told me everything I needed to know about the people I was about to spend a week with.

After dinner, the birth of the Avengers took place. Major Latterious “Tony” Starks assembled a team of Earth’s Mightiest Delegates: Luka from Colorado, Rahman from Massachusetts, Garrett from Kansas, Harrison from Iowa, Rafael from Delaware, Kross from Oklahoma, and Anthony from Louisiana. Right from the start, we got along so well. Whether it was me getting every single round of Two Truths and a Lie completely wrong while Rahman got them all right, or all of us dying laughing together, my nerves dissolved completely. I forgot these were some of the most accomplished teenagers in the country.

I felt like I was at home.

The week moved the way great weeks do—too fast and too full to fully process. Every day, the Avengers discussed current events over breakfast, played Brawl Stars on the bus to and from historic monuments, and even convinced me to run for Keynote Speaker. To get to know the other delegates, I would ask them their favorite dish and why, or throw out something unexpected just to catch them off guard. With every interaction, their faces shifted from serious to warm and genuine. That feeling was inexplicable.

One of the moments I will never forget was the Lincoln Memorial.

As I climbed the steps slowly, each one felt like a year of struggle in our nation's attempt to reform and change. When I reached the top, I could see the Washington Monument's pyramidion glistening in the sun's rays. It looked like the pinnacle of a hope this nation has not yet fully reached, but inches toward every year. As I walked around the statue of Lincoln, I heard different languages, accents, and cameras clicking from a hundred different angles. I thought about what it took for that moment to be possible: a boy whose father crossed an ocean on a student visa to build a life, making mine better in the process, now standing at the top of the Lincoln Memorial with one hundred and three of the most extraordinary young people in America.

Later that week, at a NASA dinner, former astronaut Charles Bolden looked out at all one hundred and four of us and said something I have carried with me every day since: "We will be okay because we will make it okay."

At the time, I did not fully understand what he meant. I understood it on the last day of the U.S. Senate Youth Program.

We will be okay, not because the problems are small, or the steps are few, or the monument is close enough to touch. We will be okay because of rooms like that—rooms where one hundred and four people show what America can look like when they choose to show up for one another and for something bigger than themselves.

The last day came too fast. I was going to miss Coach Three. As the Avengers took their final pictures, and as I took pictures with my fellow delegates, I kept thinking of the same truth: we will be okay.

I boarded my flight home in the same sweater and sweatpants. Argue with the hygiene aspect of that later. With two AirPods in, "Judas" was still blaring. But one thing was different: I was leaving D.C. with more than I had brought there.

"We will be okay because we will make it okay."

Avengers, Coach three, and my fellow delegates—I am sure of it.