

O'Marie Barnes, MD – 2026

If you combine friends, democracy, and civic participation, you will either find yourself at the end of a very unfortunate protest turned bad, or you'll find yourself sitting at the opening ceremonies of the United States Senate Youth Program.

There are many stereotypes of Washington, D.C., thoughts of stiff men in black suits making decisions about our everyday lives without due regard for their realities. Yet my time in the United States Senate Youth Program has further enlightened the idea that these men in black suits are not the only players in the incredible democracy that we call home. As the late Justice Thurgood Marshall put it, "This is your democracy—Make It, Protect It, Pass It on." We, the 104 delegates of the United States Senate Youth Program, share in this responsibility to play an active role in shaping what the future of our country looks like.

Whether discussing bipartisanship and intentionality in dismantling polarization with Brian Kamoie and Bill Doherty, the role of the press in holding our leaders accountable with Rachel Scott, or the importance of American soft and hard power on the world stage with Suriya Chindawongse, we heard from incredible speakers who contributed a wealth of knowledge on American domestic and geopolitical issues. We dined in the State Department, heard from NASA Administrators and business leaders, and had the opportunity to connect with alumni at some of the most prestigious universities in the world.

But the moments that will stick with me most are those shared with my roommate, Jared Schneider from Idaho, listening to our favorite gospel music well into the night, when we likely should have been asleep; The moments spent with Army Major Cale Barber, whose watchful eye ensured we stayed on tasks for the entirety of the program, those spent on charter busses chatting the infamous "Oooh-rah!" (go group three!), and spent zipping back to the Mayflower Hotel with program staff to take my ill-timed Harvard College interview, thank you, Ms. Wilk!

It is our relationship to each other that is the fundamental building block of our system of government. If the United States Senate Youth Program taught us anything, it is that Americans can approach each other with respect, camaraderie, and a shared admiration for our chequered history. In the constant struggle to become a more perfect union we may never agree on how to get there, but we can agree to be agreeable to each other, and recognize our inherent worth to the fabric of our communities.

The United States Senate Youth Program is incredible because of its ability to normalize healthy dialogue by connecting America's greatest leaders before they obtain the roles that set policy, and therefore enrich our national debate for years to come. My time in the United States Senate Youth Program is an indicator of the enduring strength of our republic, the universality of the values we cherish as Americans, and the continued emphasis we must place on cultivating a cooperative generation of citizens.