

## Katarina Ousback, ME – 2026

On Wednesday, March 11th—the fifth day of Washington Week and my 18th birthday—ABC News Senior Political Correspondent Rachel Scott said, “Rejection isn’t the end of your story.” Her words brought me back to a moment just over a year earlier, when I had been named “First Alternate” for the United States Senate Youth Program. I remember how much that moment stung, feeling like I had come so close to something I wanted deeply, only to fall just short.

And yet, a year later, here I was sitting there in Washington, D.C. as a delegate representing Maine for the 64th annual Washington Week.

Arriving at the Mayflower Hotel for the first time, I didn’t know what to expect. Coming from a small suburb in Southern Maine, I feared that I wouldn’t be as qualified as the 104 delegates who surrounded me—a sentiment I later learned was shared by many of my fellow delegates. However, upon hearing JB say, “Delegates and distinguished guests,” for the first—out of many—times during the week, I realized that we were all there as delegates, each surrounded by distinguished guests and united by the same goal: to learn, ask questions, and fully engage in the experience.

My favorite, and arguably the most inspiring, moment of the week came on Day Three, when we passed through the large marble pillars of the United States Supreme Court and sat on the wooden benches of the Supreme Court Chamber. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson spoke to us about her journey and the responsibility that comes with holding positions of influence. When she gave us, as delegates, the chance to ask her questions about her career and journey, my hand shot up. When she called on me, I had to collect my thoughts for a minute—because it’s not every day you get to speak with a U.S. Supreme Court Justice—before ultimately asking her how she interprets modern issues within the context of our over two-century-old Constitution.

When Charles Bolden spoke to us during our dinner at the National Air and Space Museum about the importance of empathy and emotion, as well as his leadership journey, he challenged us to consider how our decisions impact those around us and to recognize that leadership requires both accountability and compassion. He inspired us to believe in our own ability to make an impact, saying, “Things are going to be better because you will make them better.” His words stayed with me, serving as a reminder that the importance of leadership lies in the intention of creating positive change in the spaces we are given.

Later in the week, at the Pentagon, we had the opportunity to hear from Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Dan Caine. I remember him telling us to constantly ask ourselves, “And then what?”, encouraging us to always strive to become better versions of ourselves as leaders.

Throughout the week, moments like these built on one another, reinforcing the idea that leadership begins with awareness, engagement, and the willingness to act. That being said, the speakers aren’t the only thing that left an impact on my week in Washington. The 104 delegates—two from each state, two from Washington, D.C., and two from the DoDEA—made the experience truly meaningful. Surrounded by students who are equally passionate, it was refreshing to engage in conversations that led to deeper connections. Coming from a predominantly White suburb, I especially valued the differences in culture, beliefs, and opinion, which brought about interesting discussions and challenged me to see ideas from perspectives I hadn’t considered before. Whether we bonded over a shared appreciation for volunteering for children with disabilities and illnesses or over the lack of a Chick-fil-A in our hometown, each conversation brought so much joy and connection to the week. And, in reality, it’s these small

moments—playing hangman during lunch in the Pentagon, getting soaking wet in the rain while waiting to enter the White House, eating the top of the white chocolate Capitol Dome USSYP dessert, making a “fit check” for the Senate Youth Divas Instagram page, getting lost in the Mayflower hallway on the way to my room, discussing dirty soda flavors in our Military Mentor group, and figuring out the settings on my digital camera—that were the most memorable.

Our Military Mentors were another instrumental part of my Senate Youth experience, and I know the program wouldn't be the same without them. Beyond sharing insights about their own leadership and service journeys, they created a space where we could ask questions, reflect, and grow more confident in our own perspectives. Their guidance encouraged me to think more critically about leadership and to voice our opinions while also listening to, valuing, and growing because of the perspectives of those around us.

Looking back on this experience, Rachel Scott's words, “Rejection isn't the end of your story,” now feel especially meaningful. What once felt like a moment of disappointment ultimately became the reason I stood in Washington, D.C. for the 64th Annual Washington Week, surrounded by opportunities to learn, grow, and connect with others who share the same passion for making a difference. Being named a “First Alternate” did not define the end of my story, but instead shaped the path that led me here, surrounded by the most incredible and accomplished group of people I've ever met.

My week in Washington, D.C., shaped me in ways I cannot fully describe in words. I left the Mayflower Hotel with 104 new friends, a (severe) lack of sleep, a digital camera full of photos, pages upon pages of notes, the most amazing memories, and maybe even a tear in my eye. More than that, I left with the hope for a better tomorrow created by me and the 104 inspiring leaders that I know will create meaningful change in their communities and beyond. And as Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson said, “You have agency. No one should feel like they don't have the ability to create change.” Justice Jackson's words now stay with me as I continue forward, knowing that I have the ability to make an impact and to keep writing the next chapter of my story.