

Grace Kim, NJ – 2026

A bag of frozen corn from Trader Joe's. That is how I found out I had been selected as the New Jersey delegate for the United States Senate Youth Program.

The moment was, fittingly, a bit chaotic. I had been running late to school on an icy December morning when I slipped and landed hard on the pavement. After stubbornly making it through part of the day, I went home, in pain and under strict instructions from my doctor to ice the injury, only to realize we had no ice packs. So there I was, lying in bed with a bag of frozen corn balanced on my right side, when I opened the email congratulating me on my selection. In my excitement, the corn went flying.

Leading up to Washington Week, as I spoke with other delegates and spent hours planning my outfits, I worried that my anticipation might outpace the experience itself, that it wouldn't quite live up to my lofty expectations. Somehow, though, the program exceeded them entirely.

There were many highlights, but the people stand out first. Being surrounded by 104 driven and curious students made it possible to have thoughtful conversations about the "political and economic state of the world" that would have made Jaden Smith quite proud. These were people who read the news daily, knew what a filibuster is, and genuinely cared about making a difference. In this environment, being interested in politics wasn't unusual, but rather, the norm. I had finally found a place where liking politics is cool.

At the same time, there is no single mold for a Senate Youth delegate. While some aspire to careers in government, others are future scientists, doctors, and educators, each bringing unique perspectives shaped by their own experiences. What united us wasn't identical ambition, but a shared sense of purpose: to make the world a better place.

Beyond the people, what truly sets this program apart is the access it provides. There are few opportunities for high school students to hear directly from our nation's foremost leaders and experts, let alone to engage with them. Throughout the week, we heard from figures such as Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, as well as former NASA administrator and astronaut Charles Bolden.

What made these interactions especially impactful was the opportunity to ask substantive, unfiltered questions. I asked Senator Katie Britt about efforts to ban congressional stock trading, State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary Camille Dawson about the recent lack of evacuation efforts for American citizens in the Middle East, and Rachel Scott about the growing influence of billionaire ownership on news media and its implications for journalistic integrity. These were not hypothetical or surface-level questions, but real concerns I had as a citizen, and the program gave me the rare chance to voice them directly.

My biggest takeaway, however, was something more human. On the first day, Ryan Gavin of the Senate Youth Alumni Association told us that by the end of the week, we would come to see that behind the titles and accomplishments, our nation's leaders are still just people. They are impressive people, but people nonetheless. And after reflecting on the experience, I've found that idea to be true.

One of the most common questions throughout the week was how our generation can overcome political polarization. While I don't have a definitive answer, I think it begins with remembering this simple truth: the individuals shaping our world are human, just like us. That reality does not excuse mistakes, but it does make change feel more possible. We do not need to be extraordinary or untouchable to make an impact. The leaders we look up to are not fundamentally different from us; they are people who chose to care and act. And that realization, more than anything else, is what made this experience so meaningful.