

Lakshmi Birasam, OK – 2026

“Delegates and Distinguished Guests.” How I wish I could rewind to March 7th, 2026, to hear those words again for the first time.

When I found out that I would be one of two delegates representing Oklahoma at the 64th United States Senate Youth Program, I was truly at a loss for words. Sitting in my Honors Microbiology class, I turned my phone toward my friends in shock. Little did I know that Senate Youth would become one of the most transformative experiences of my life. Coming from Oklahoma, the state with one of, if not the lowest, voter turnout rates in the nation, the idea of being surrounded by 104 civically minded students, questioning our leaders, and engaging in meaningful discourse was beyond exciting.

My co-delegate and I boarded our flight amid hours of tornado warnings, a hallmark of Oklahoma’s unpredictable weather that didn’t even faze us anymore. I got my first sense of what Washington Week would be like at airport baggage claim. As we introduced ourselves and shared our states, other delegates immediately asked for our opinions on Oklahoma Senator Markwayne Mullin being nominated for Secretary of Homeland Security. In that moment, I realized I was surrounded by students who were not only informed, but eager to challenge one another and engage in meaningful discourse. It showed me that Senate Youth is a place where curiosity and a willingness to engage are essential.

As I entered the Mayflower Hotel, a sense of nervousness washed over me, but it quickly faded as I felt immediately welcomed by everyone around me. Within minutes, I was listening to Dr. Bill Doherty, Co-Founder of Braver Angels, speak about polarization and how the organization brings people across ideological lines together for civil discourse. My co-delegate and I then had the opportunity to sit down with him and discuss our predictions for the 2028 presidential election, as well as the causes of polarization in our own communities.

As we toured the Capitol and the White House, sitting just feet from the nation’s most powerful leaders, I was in awe of the opportunity before me. These were the rooms where decisions affecting every American are made. Seeing our leaders answer our questions directly humanized them and reminded me that behind every policy there are individuals shaping our nation’s future.

Brian Kamoie, a former Senate Youth delegate himself, recited a quote that made me dwell on my own understanding of what I wanted to do and the kind of impact I hoped to have, so much so that I changed my senior quote to it: “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” by Mary Oliver. It is a question I carried with me throughout the program, much like many of the other delegates. Though I do not completely know the answer just yet, Senate Youth was a step in the right direction, reaffirming my decision to keep public service at the forefront of whatever I choose to do.

To the 104 delegates of the 64th United States Senate Youth Program, thank you. From heated games of Mafia, playing hangman in the U.S. Supreme Court, and forming running jokes about political polarization, to staying up until the brink of dawn yapping with my roommate and realizing just how similar two girls from opposite parts of the country could be, I truly could not have asked for better people to experience this program with.

To the Military Mentors, thank you for your service, your time, and your dedication. To my Military Mentor, Lt. Carl’meisha Caraballo, thank you for your unwavering support and for being a pillar for the Queen Bees group. To Jakub, thank you not only for taking the best pictures to remember Senate Youth by, but also for taking the time to learn each of our names before we even arrived at the hotel.

To the 65th class of the United States Senate Youth delegates, enjoy every moment, put yourself out there, and take it all in. It'll be over before you know it. Thank you to all the Senate Youth delegates, the Military Mentors, and the Hearst Foundations for making this incredible program so memorable. Hearing "Delegates and Distinguished Guests" for the first time on March 7th, 2026, felt like stepping into a world I never imagined. Now, looking back on the friendships I made and the lessons I learned, I wish I could hear those words again for the first time, knowing just how transformative this experience would be.