

## Katherine Yang, RI – 2026

The first—and only time—I had gone to D.C. before March of 2026 was during the summer after I turned 7. Freshly graduated from first grade, I was thrilled at the opportunity to step foot inside *the* White House. Although I didn't know much about the grand abode on Pennsylvania Avenue at the time, I was certain of one thing: it was a place where important people lived and worked.

So, when I embarked on a journey back to the nation's capital this Spring before I turned 18, I arrived at the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel with the same wonder and curiosity I possessed as a child. Yet while the magic of the city remained, my perspective shifted; I came not only to marvel at the architecture, but also to engage with the brilliance of the peers I would meet and the complexity of our government, with the “importance” I sensed at age 7 guiding my passion in public service.

From the moment I stepped into the ballroom, I realized that the week that was upon me was undoubtedly going to be one of the most transformative weeks of my life. I knew this to be true not only because of the grandeur of The Mayflower, but because even the first people I met would become friendships I'm certain will last a lifetime. Regardless of where we were from or what our backgrounds were, I possessed a deep-rooted similarity with each and every single delegate that convened in that ballroom: a commitment to creating a better future. And this single string of similarity was all that we needed to guide us through packed itineraries while operating on three-hours of sleep and navigating the inherent high-pressure environment of our nation's most hallowed halls.

On the first night, as I sat with seven other girls who would soon become my closest bonds and a Military Mentor I would learn to deeply cherish, my mentor Captain Amelia Weaver posed a question for us to answer as we introduced ourselves: what is it that concerns you the most about our world? Somberly, each of us answered from deep within our hearts; we spoke about climate change, political polarization, widespread apathy, and a losing interest in our government. This conversation laid a profound foundation for the remainder of the week. As we posed questions to our nation's most prominent leaders or engaged in dialogue with those around us, we fueled the concerns we had into productive discourse. Yet the conversations I shared with my mentor group didn't stop at concern — it reached into a feeling we were all desperately drawing on: hope. For the remainder of the week, when our group met in the hallway of the fifth floor at 6:45am each morning, we spoke of the reminders in our society that gave us hope: hope for the day before us and every other day that was to come.

That hope persisted with each speaker and each event. In the courtroom of the Supreme Court, with all 105 delegates focused attentively on Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, hope existed where we listened as she spoke about elevating marginalized youth into careers of public service. In the grand entrance of the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, hope existed when former NASA administrator Charles Bolden Jr. spoke about the unlikely connections he formed with individuals of other countries and other races. Hope existed when our visit to the Arlington National Cemetery evoked inevitable tears from delegates, mentors, and staff alike—but it was more than just a collective grief. In the heavy silence of the hills, as the weight of sacrifice felt almost too heavy to hold, my fellow delegate and dear friend beside me reached out a hand. In that wordless squeeze, the hope we spoke about became a reminder that we do not have to carry burdens alone. But most of all, hope existed as I sat through every delicious three-course meal with all of my peers, watching the glimmer in their eyes and the infinite potential each of them held.

There aren't many words I can use to truly cast light on the life-changing nature of my week. But as I stepped back into the DCA on March 14th, I thought of one quote that resonated the most with me: shared by my mentor Captain Weaver, "if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." In this week, I found that the "important people" I once looked for in the White House were actually sitting right beside me. Together, we have already begun the journey toward a brighter future.