

## **Anna Gallardo-Ibarra, WI – 2026**

“What will you do with your one wild and precious life?” Day One, a question asked by Brian Kamoie, borrowed from Mary Oliver. I did not expect to be asked a loaded question on the first day, little did I know this was just the start. This question deeply resonated with me due to the interactions with my fellow delegates and Military Mentors. I began to understand that my “wild and precious life” was not limited to my future self, but it was focused on the present.

When I was told that I would be one of Wisconsin’s delegates for the United States Senate Youth Program, tears filled my eyes with joy and excitement, but there was a consistent voice in my head saying “Why me?” Why would they pick me? Did they make the right choice?” I was competing against students of the highest possible caliber. So I asked again, why me? When I arrived in Washington D.C, I was afraid I would be different; and I was, but so were all 105 delegates. We were different, and it was beautiful. As I had conversations, met people, and created relationships, my perspective changed. Why not me? Why couldn’t I be the right choice? Although I felt like it at first, as I am sure all delegates did, I was not an imposter. I was exactly where I needed to be.

I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by the greatest minds of my generation, and together we were able to listen to complex speakers such as: Justice Jackson, Charles Bolden, Tammy Baldwin, Rachel Scott, and Pete Hegseth. Each speaker brought a new perspective to issues that were occurring in our country, and their words reinforced the lesson given to my breakfast table by Major “Tony” Starks, “Everyone is human.” At first I was not sure what he meant. The words of Major Starks managed to humanize some of our most important leaders, which led me to be more compassionate as they spoke. As each speaker was challenged by our questions, I understood that they too, did not know the answers to everything.

Although we had many inspiring speakers, some of my favorite speakers were the delegates themselves. On election night, the words of different delegates wanting to give the farewell speech filled the room. “Become the person that the other versions of you wish they were,” this quote was given to the ballroom by Delaware’s delegate, Sadie Polk. Sadie told us the story of how her elementary teacher would say, “in another life,” she would have been someone else. Sadie quickly questioned our class, “Why not this life?” I think about this often; I now wake up with the goal of becoming someone I will one day be proud of.

Memories I know I’ll never forget were created in some of the most important buildings in the United States of America. From having an important talk about ice cream with Diego in the Russell Senate Office Building, to playing games about who could name the most fruits in the Pentagon with Amira, Anthony, Rowan, Harrison, Kyle, and Luka, but also speed walking through NASA with Sadie because we wanted good spots on the bus. Although many of our laughable memories made were in these important buildings, the deeper nostalgia was created in the words we exchanged. Religion, abortion, war, and the meaning of life were discussed among delegates. We felt safe to share our opinions on controversial topics that in moments of distress had torn our country apart. We were brave enough to say, “I don’t know,” and “I had never thought about it that way before.”

As our trip came to an end, my heart was broken. I would not only miss the Washington Week experience, but the people who were by my side through all of it. But at the end of the day, even though we are hundreds or even thousands of miles away from each other, there is comfort in knowing that we are all under the same moon, the same stars, and most importantly, under the same memories. The United States Senate Youth Program changed my life and perspective in a way I never thought possible. I now wake up more inspired, ready to listen, ready to understand, ready to ask “How?” instead of “Why?” I am ready to watch the United States Senate Youth Program class of 2026 continue to become the leaders of America.