

Emily Nguyễn, MO – 2026

Each spring, three fire hydrants are installed in the Liberty High School stairway between the 300 and 400 hallways. And no, we aren't prone to fires.

Instead, my high school's art department has a tradition of calling upon its most ambitious and creative seniors to compete for a chance to paint one of these fire hydrants and win a \$750 college scholarship. As a lifelong painter, I was excited to become a senior and paint my own fire hydrant. As a political junkie, I was especially happy with this year's contest theme, "America 250."

With the paper application—that outlined a blank fire hydrant to sketch your preferred design—in hand, I thought about America, what it meant to me, and what I could leave with my community through this artistic opportunity.

I started brainstorming ideas. A dozen or so faces—comprised of multi-color swirls of paint, as if *Starry Night* came to life—shifted in and out of my mind. Malcolm X. Wong Kim Ark. Nikki Giovanni. Joan Baez. Woodward and Bernstein. Dolores Huerta. I barely scratched the surface of the countless names that create our collective and sacrificial American history. But it was a start.

My participation in the United States Senate Youth Program reaffirmed my belief that America is not the American flag, the White House, or other symbols that have stood the test of time. America is people, temporary in that our lives eventually expire, but also permanent as we pass the torch of responsibility and civic duty along to the next generation. In my time existing as a young person, student, artist, journalist, and, for a short time, delegate, I have realized that I am most inspired by people—especially the people I was surrounded by during Washington Week.

The people who lined the walls of the National Portrait Gallery. Frozen in time, we can retrospectively view their faces, cemented in colored oils, as a representation of American history—something bigger than any individual.

The people, excuse me, distinguished guests, we had the honor of hearing from and speaking to. Justice Jackson, whose purple-wearing and Mary Oliver-reciting presence jolted my sleep-deprived body and mind awake. Senator Britt who transformed the front of the Mayflower Hotel's Grand Ballroom into a stage as she fired statistics about TikTok, Snapchat, and teenagers into the crowd in response to Arielle's question. Secretary Hegseth's insistence that any of our questions would be better than any from the press. General Kaine, who simply told us to read and recommended *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius to us.

The people behind the planning and execution of my week in the nation's capital. Lieutenant Carl'meisha Carabello (the best Military Mentor ever), who never failed to keep us "Queen Bees" balanced between the four pillars of the United States Senate Youth Program: education, leadership, public service, and most of all, respect. Nurse Rose, who kept my (and a few other delegates') colds at bay with menthol lozenges, Aleve, and tenderness.

The people, mostly nameless and silent until they asked me if I wanted coffee service with my dessert, worked endlessly to deliver my first series of three-course meals like clockwork. Their efforts placed the cherry on top of my stay at The Mayflower.

And, of course, the 104 other people whom I can forever call my, in the words of JB, distinguished delegates. My roommate, Selayna, who humored me on historic political conspiracy theories far too late into the night. My "number neighbors," Anna and Luka, who fended off heavy rain and wind with me as we braced the security checkpoints leading to the White House. Makaylah, my plane buddy to and from St. Louis Lambert and Ronald Reagan. My beloved Queen Bees, shoutout to Charliza, who shook Senator Warren's hand alongside me at the Senate Reception, and Lakshmi, who correctly predicted perhaps the biggest success of my college application journey. Omy, who was unanimously adopted as everyone's little brother. And of course, my co-delegate, Rahman.

I never got to paint my own fire hydrant. The timing did not work out because of my invigorating week surrounded by people, who in my mind are representations of America, each an individual reminder of what is and continues to be the drive behind a land governed by a wisdom begun with “We the People.”

When I travel to Mr. D’Antonio’s class, using the 300 and 400 hallway staircase, my eyes are naturally drawn to the three fire hydrants. Each is a variation of the American flag, a patriotic and flat collage of red, white, and blue. How other people, especially young people, see America is not—and is sometimes even the opposite—of how I see America. That was something else that Washington Week taught me.

America is comprised of people—individuals with their own ideas about what America can and should be. While this sentiment is certainly not a new or original thought, seeing this idea in action was fundamental to the American, individual, and person I want to become.

Another rudimentary idea. I don’t need a fire hydrant or paint to share my idea of America. I have my future, shaped by my time at the United States Senate Youth Program, to do just that.