

2026 Voice of Democracy First Place Winner
"How Are You Showing Patriotism and Support for Our Country?"
Olivia Drewniak
Bath, Maine

Patriotism is more than the colors of our flag or the sound of our national anthem—it's the quiet promise we keep to the ideals that built this country. A lifelong passion for and commitment to the principles and beliefs that founded our nation. It's courage born from conviction, sacrifice made without reward, and service given not for recognition but for faith in an inherent good. From the moment our founders pledged their "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor," America was built on principles of freedom, duty, and unity—a belief that ordinary citizens could rise together to protect something extraordinary. To me, patriotism means carrying that promise forward.

I've grown up watching my mother defend that very promise. My mother is a Commander in the United States Coast Guard, and for over twenty years, she's devoted her life to the service of her country and its citizens.

I've strived every day to live up to the example she set not only through words, but through action and service. I volunteer at my local food bank and shelters to ensure that every person in our great nation is treated with the care, compassion, and dignity they deserve—because patriotism means lifting up those who share in the promise of America. I've dedicated countless hours to voter registration drives, believing wholeheartedly that access to the ballot is not only a privilege but the beating heart of our democracy—the voice of the people. I've organized Veteran Appreciation events, luncheons, and gift drives to honor the brave men and women who have risked their lives to keep our nation free. Through these acts of service, I strive to embody the spirit of America: unity, sacrifice, and unwavering hope for a better future.

Which is why on November 15th, 2024, I enlisted in the United States Coast Guard at the age of 17. I didn't want to wait to serve my country, so I became one of thirteen individuals across the nation selected to take part in a pilot program allowing teenagers to enlist in the Reserves between their Junior and Senior years of high school. I refused to give up on my education but knew that I was capable of doing more. So I chose to serve in the military.

I knew that liberty and freedom require sacrifice. And that was a sacrifice I was ready and willing to make. I fought my way through eight weeks of basic training as the youngest and smallest person there. I fought my way through pushups on hot pavement until my hands burned and peeled, being forced to scream at pictures of drowning victims taped to the wall—"I couldn't save you"—until bile scorched my throat raw, and running miles with blistered feet, my socks sticking to bloody skin. I fought my way through pain, uncertainty, and fear. But my patriotism didn't falter in the face of adversity, and in the hard moments I relied on the strength of my conviction that I was serving something greater than myself. Something worthy. Because I

wasn't doing it for myself, I was doing it for all the people I hoped to help and all the lives I hoped to make better.

I enlisted because I believe in my country. Through highs and lows, mistakes, and imperfections. My patriotism lies not in this country's land or wealth, but in devotion to its principles and faith in its people. I trust that we will remain united and just. That we care for our people, protect what is right, and stand up against what is wrong.

I am doing my small part to give back to the country that has given me so much, and in tribute to the brave men and women who have come before me, hoping to uphold their legacy of honor and sacrifice. I will continue this commitment as I work through college, pursuing a degree in political science to further advocate for the growth and preservation of our nation's values.

I encourage everyone to find their own way to serve—to uphold the ideals that bind us together as Americans. Service doesn't always wear a uniform or stand at attention. It can be found in the classroom, in community centers, at the polls, or in the simple act of helping a neighbor. Patriotism lives in every person who chooses compassion over indifference, unity over division, and action over apathy. Whether through public service, volunteerism, or everyday kindness, we each have the power to strengthen our nation and carry forward the promise our founders made generations ago.