



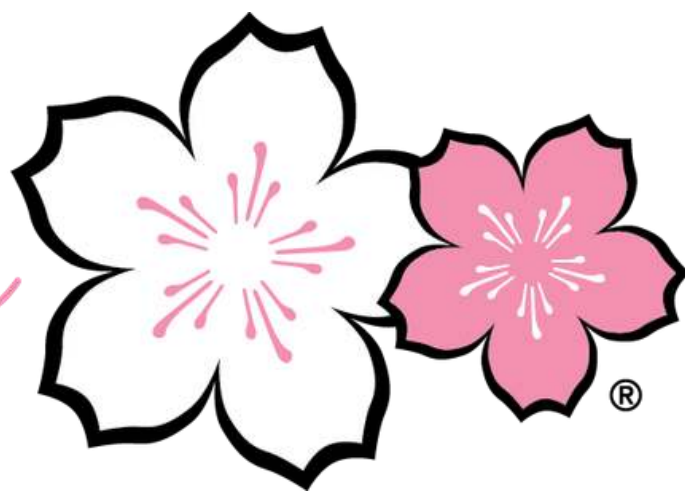
2026 Goodwill Ambassadors Report



*Once a Goodwill Ambassador,
always a Goodwill Ambassador!*

Compiled and edited by Carlos Alexei Márquez Arce

NATIONAL
Cherry Blossom
FESTIVAL



Goodwill Ambassador Program





Goodwill Ambassador Program

The Goodwill Ambassador Program, coordinated by the National Cherry Blossom Festival, is one of the most highly regarded signature programs of the Festival combining aspects of education, culture, the arts and building community.



WHO WE'RE LOOKING FOR

Individuals passionate about international exchange and the National Cherry Blossom Festival who come together to:

- Represent the Festival at community and cultural events
- Foster U.S.-Japan friendship through engagement and exchange
- Share Japanese culture and language with wide range of audiences
- Lead interactive activities at events like the Blossom Kite Festival and Petalpalooza®

ELIGIBILITY

- Current undergraduate or graduate students, or recent college graduates under 25
- Reside in the D.C. area (temporarily or permanently) from January - May 2027
- Interest in Japanese culture, arts, humanities, event management, or hospitality
- Knowledge of Japan or Japanese language preferred, but not required
- Strong connection to or appreciation for the D.C. community

APPLICATIONS AVAILABLE MID-OCTOBER

**FOR INQUIRIES CONTACT US AT
GOODWILLAMBASSADORS@NCBFDC.ORG**

**LEARN MORE ABOUT
THE PROGRAM**



 [TINYURL.COM/NCBF-GWA](https://tinyurl.com/NCBF-GWA)

2026 Goodwill Ambassador Program Coordinators



REIKO HIRAI

Reiko Hirai is the founder of Happi Enterprises, LLC, a Kyoto native who has called the DC area home for over 25 years. In 2006, she launched her event management and consulting business, serving as a vital bridge between Japanese and U.S. businesses while sharing her passion for cultural exchange. Through her work, Reiko has immersed herself in everything from Japanese music and technology to art and food, collaborating with organizations such as the Embassy of Japan and more — including over 15 years of partnership with the National Cherry Blossom Festival. Driven by a passion to bring Japan closer, she founded DC Sake cō. in 2020 with a vision of connecting with the community through the world of Japanese sake — a bold new chapter she is wholeheartedly pursuing.



GRACE KIM

Grace Kim is the founder and CEO of Grace Eventive, an event planning and logistics company specializing in cultural and corporate events. Born in the United States to Korean parents, Grace spent much of her childhood in Japan, as well as in Korea and the United States, giving her a unique cross-cultural perspective that informs her work today.

From 2015 to 2016, Grace served as a Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) in Okayama Prefecture through the JET Program. Upon returning from Japan, Grace worked at the U.S.-Japan Council for six years, administering cultural exchange programs and scholarships. Now based in Northern Virginia, she brings her extensive program planning experience and bilingual fluency in Japanese and English to serve clients primarily in the Greater Washington region.



CARLOS ALEXEI MÁRQUEZ ARCE

Carlos A. Marquez Arce is currently a graduate student at the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University with an array of professional experiences in public, cultural, and legislative diplomacy in the U.S. - Japan sphere. Before graduating from the Joint Bachelor's Degree Program in Global International Relations of American University and Ritsumeikan University in 2025, Carlos was a Goodwill Ambassador for the National Cherry Blossom Festival.

As a polyglot and someone born and raised in México, with experience living and studying in Australia, Canada, and Japan, Carlos has come to realize the value of embracing multiple perspectives and bridging connections between people. He actively participates and seeks to contribute to events like the National Cherry Blossom Festival, and pursues professional opportunities, like his current internship at the Japan - U.S. Friendship Commission, to advance diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges.

2026 Goodwill Ambassadors Bio



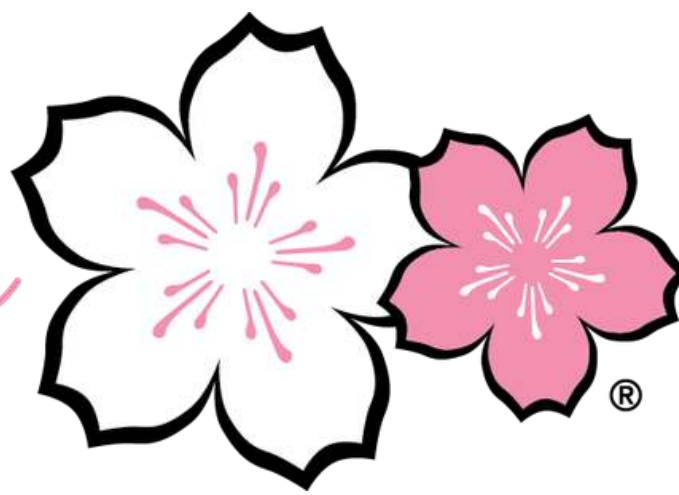
ABDULLAH ABDULAZIZ

Abdullah is a first-year student at Howard University studying Supply Chain Management and minoring in Japanese. His parents immigrated to the United States from West Africa, and he was born and raised in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Growing up surrounded by different cultures sparked his curiosity about the world and how people connect across borders. After graduating high school, Abdullah participated in a short study abroad experience in Japan, which deepened his interest in international relations and U.S.–Japan exchange. Since then, he has enjoyed getting involved in programs that bring people together through language and cultural understanding. Outside of academics, Abdullah loves learning languages, playing volleyball and basketball, and connecting with people from diverse backgrounds. His favorite thing about Washington, D.C. is its international atmosphere. What he loves most about Japan is the way tradition and modern life coexist, and of course, the food!



LUCY KNOEPFLMACHER

Introduced to Japanese language and culture through her elementary school, Lucy Knoepflmacher has had an almost lifelong passion for US-Japan relations. This passion culminated in May 2025 with her graduation from the Sakura Scholars Joint Degree Program between American University in Washington, D.C. and Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan. Lucy's favorite thing about D.C. is the free museums and abundance of pupusas, and her favorite thing about Kyoto is the rich cultural and historical sites and the abundance of convenience store onigiri. Lucy hopes to use her past experiences to foster community and understanding through intercultural education, both as a Goodwill Ambassador and beyond. She can't wait to work with everyone to make this National Cherry Blossom Festival the best one yet!



2026 Goodwill Ambassadors Bio



LILY NGUYEN

Lily is a current graduate student at Georgetown University in the M.S. in Foreign Service program, studying science, technology, and international affairs. Originally from the plains of Wichita, Kansas, she moved to the mountainous islands of Kamiyamakusa, Kumamoto from 2022 - 2024 through the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) Program and served as National AJET Vice Chair from 2023 to 2024. Her favorite parts about living in Japan (besides her students, of course!) were road trips

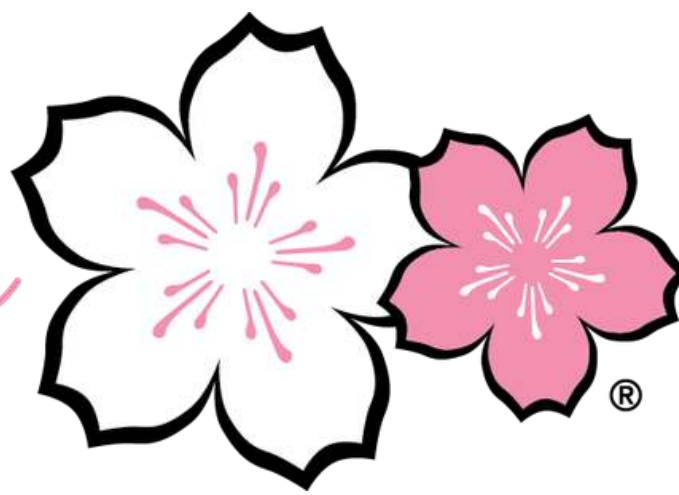
throughout the hidden gems of rural Kyushu and Chugoku regions. Most recently, Lily interned with the Holy See Mission to the United Nations in New York City, covering human rights and development issues, and with USAID as a Humanitarian and Climate Crisis intern. In her free time, she enjoys visiting history museums, having picnics with friends, and appreciating all the cultural diversity D.C. has to offer.



ADENA NORWOOD

Adena is currently a graduate student within the Walsh School of Foreign Service, within the International Migration and Refugees Program at Georgetown University, with a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology. She plans to utilize her education to serve as a Political Foreign Service Officer and diplomat to advance research-based solutions to migrant policy and refugee crises. Being born into a Naval family, she relocated often; however, she calls Maryland home.

When Adena is not pursuing her graduate degree, she is passionate about pursuing her viticulture certifications as she aspires to found an ethical vineyard to promote safer migrant agricultural working conditions. Her hobbies also include pursuing Yoga instructor training and using her Anthropological Bachelor's degree to research second-hand clothing-based migratory routes within Western Africa to consult for International Fashion groups. As an aspiring diplomat, she is intrigued to become an expert on Japanese and American relations, an impressive, long-term, successful allyship between two influential countries.



2026 Goodwill Ambassadors Bio



TOMOHIRO NOZAKI

Tomohiro was born and raised in Mexico City to Japanese parents. After spending his childhood in Mexico, he moved to the United States to complete high school and pursue higher education. Currently, he is a fourth-year undergraduate student at Georgetown University, where he is majoring in Psychology and minoring in Japanese. Fluent in Spanish, Japanese, and English, he enjoys navigating the intersections of his trilingual upbringing. An avid mover, Tomohiro stays active through swimming,

weightlifting, and volleyball. When he is not in the gym, he can be found exploring the D.C. food scene or singing karaoke with friends. He particularly loves the walkability of Washington, D.C., and appreciates how easily he can reach downtown shops and restaurants on foot from campus. As a self-proclaimed foodie, he ranks Japan as his favorite destination, citing the country's world-class cuisine as his favorite thing about the culture.



WIWIN SURYANI

Wiwin is a recent graduate of St. Olaf College, where she studied Political Science with concentrations in International Relations and Data Science. An international student from Indonesia, she first left home at the age of 17 after receiving a scholarship to pursue high school in Japan. After moving to the U.S. for college, she traveled to five countries during a semester abroad to learn more about the world. She is now based in Washington, D.C., where she works at FWD.us, a bipartisan political advocacy

organization, as a full-time Federal Policy and Government Relations Intern. In this role, she supports background research and develops advocacy materials related to the current administration's immigration policy agenda. Wiwin is trilingual in Indonesian, Japanese, and English. She has applied her language skills and interest in Japan as a Japanese tutor for advanced-level learners at St. Olaf College and as a Japanese summer camp counselor, where she led cultural immersion activities for middle school students. In her free time, Wiwin enjoys cooking spicy Indonesian cuisine, exploring coffee shops in D.C., and going to karaoke.



2026 Goodwill Ambassadors Bio



NATSUKI TAKIZAWA

Natsuki was born and raised in the DMV area to Japanese parents and spent every summer of her childhood in Japan visiting family and friends. She has been involved in a variety of Japanese cultural activities, including Hyakunin Isshu karuta, as well as Wadaiko and Okinawan drumming, performing as an Okinawan Taiko drummer in the National Cherry Blossom Festival Parade and at Sakura Matsuri from 2012 to 2020. Natsuki recently graduated from college, where she studied communication and art and interned at the Japan Information & Culture Center (JICC) at the Embassy of Japan, supporting cultural programming and public outreach. With a strong interest in cultural education, she hopes to help create opportunities that foster cross-cultural understanding, curiosity, and connection. In her free time, Natsuki enjoys drawing, crafting, visiting museums, solving puzzles, and learning new languages.



**Insights from
the
2026
Goodwill
Ambassadors**



ABDULLAH ABDULAZIZ

Participating as a Goodwill Ambassador for the National Cherry Blossom Festival has been one of the most meaningful experiences I've had this year. Through this program, I learned the importance of cultural exchange and how events like the festival bring people from different backgrounds together. Representing the festival helped me better understand the history behind the cherry blossoms and the strong relationship between the United States and Japan.

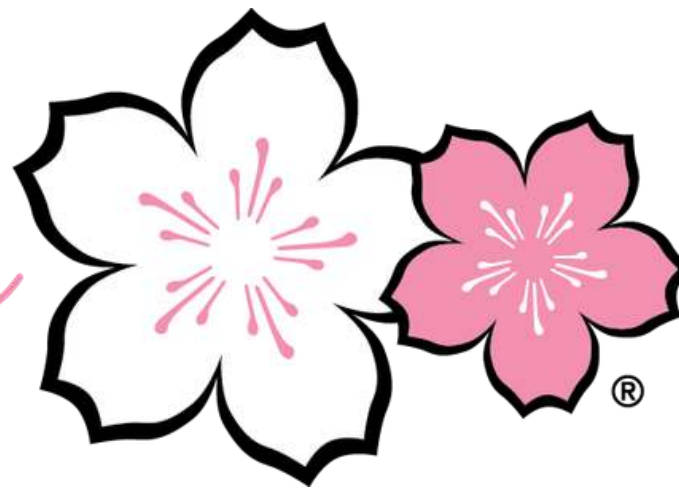
After completing a cultural exchange program in Japan last year, as well as participating in the Kizuna Across Cultures Global Classmates Summit, I knew I wanted to continue participating in this type of intercultural exchange. As a Goodwill Ambassador, I was able to promote those same ideas alongside my colleagues to the community, which I am very grateful for. Intercultural understanding begins with learning, and I am glad I was able to teach a little bit about U.S.-Japan relations to the community.

As a liaison for the festival, I had the opportunity to attend events, meet community leaders, and connect with other ambassadors who share similar interests. As a Supply Chain major, I was also able to network with business representatives in the U.S.-Japan space, learn about their journeys, and see how I can apply those insights to my own path.

Overall, this experience had a lasting impact both personally and professionally. It strengthened my understanding of cultural exchange and the importance of building meaningful connections across communities. The relationships I built and the events I attended gave me a deeper perspective on U.S.-Japan relations. Moving forward, I plan to apply what I learned by continuing to seek opportunities in global collaboration and intercultural engagement.



NATIONAL *Cherry Blossom* FESTIVAL



LUCY KNOEPFLMACHER

My time as a Goodwill Ambassador provided me with the opportunity to hone invaluable skills for both my professional and personal development. From interacting with foreign dignitaries and company executives to children and families from the DC community, every chance to represent the Festival and the gift of cherry blossoms was a gift in itself. I practiced networking, facilitating, leading, and collaborating with my fellow Ambassadors to build lasting connections and memories.

One moment that will stay with me for years to come was learning how to exchange business cards according to Japanese professional etiquette. Learning from our Program Coordinators and practicing with the other Goodwill Ambassadors was both fun and useful, and was a beautiful display of the opportunities for intercultural exchange that the Goodwill Ambassador Program provides.

As someone interested in connecting my passion for intercultural exchange with making a positive social impact on both global and local scales, the Goodwill Ambassador Program demonstrated a way for me to make this connection in a meaningful and lasting way. My experiences connecting with both high-level professionals and grassroots-level community members will be relevant to my current position in the nonprofit sector and my career aspirations, which will undoubtedly require me to work with individuals from all walks of life. I am very grateful to have had this opportunity, and hope to stay engaged with the National Cherry Blossom Festival.





ADENA MARIE NORWOOD

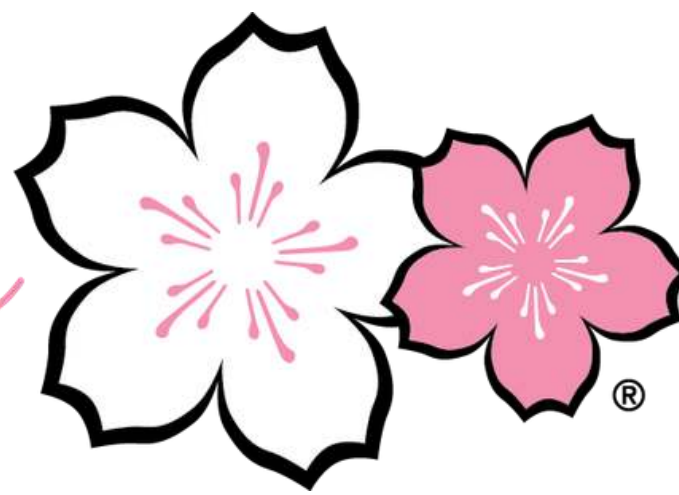
Upon hearing I was selected to become a Goodwill Ambassador for the National Cherry Blossom Festival, I was honored to be chosen for the role, as my background only had a light Japanese influence. My father, a naval engineer, lived in Okinawa, Japan, for much of his childhood and raised my sister and I with international and Japanese values. Becoming a Goodwill Ambassador was a rare full-circle experience for me. I was in the children's choir featured in a past NCBF parade and was able to explore Japanese culture that so colored my father's upbringing.

I experienced many enlightening experiences during my time with the Goodwill Ambassador Program. I gained a sense of pride serving as a representative of the festival. Guests and locals began to recognize me over time and looked to me as an ambassador for more than the blossoms. I believe this is true Diplomacy. D.C. locals appreciated my public-facing presence and dedication to their city. At the same time, I had the responsibility of transforming my conduct and presence to suit professional diplomatic communities. Attending networking opportunities with the Japanese Ambassador during his evening reception and events like the Japanese Fair at the Kennedy Center taught me how to be dynamic like a practicing diplomat. The public relies on me to be an approachable leader, and the international community expects me to be a respectable representative of both my country and my own values.

This opportunity not only connected me with professionals that I still keep in touch with, but also gave me a brief and thorough education in serving as a Foreign Service officer as a Diplomat after I graduate.



NATIONAL *Cherry Blossom* FESTIVAL



TOMOHIRO NOZAKI

Serving as a 2026 National Cherry Blossom Festival Goodwill Ambassador has been one of the most meaningful and transformative experiences of my life. Through this role, I learned how powerful cultural exchange can be when it is rooted in kindness, service, and genuine human connection. One of my most memorable experiences was welcoming guests at the Opening Ceremony, where I had the opportunity to guide attendees, answer questions, and help create a warm atmosphere for visitors from many different backgrounds. Seeing the joy on people's faces reminded me that even small acts of service can make a lasting impact. Another unforgettable moment was helping lead activities at the Oxon Run Pinknic, where I witnessed how communities come together through art, music, storytelling, and shared celebration. These experiences taught me that diplomacy often begins in everyday interactions.

The experience that impacted me most deeply was participating in the National Japanese American Memorial Foundation Freedom Walk. I had the honor of speaking before veterans, community leaders, and guests while reflecting on the history of Japanese Americans during World War II and the importance of resilience, empathy, and trust. As someone who was born and raised in Mexico, later moved to the United States, and will soon continue my journey in Japan, this moment felt deeply personal.

Living across cultures has taught me the importance of listening, adapting, and building bridges between people. Standing at the memorial, I felt not only connected to history, but also responsible for helping carry its lessons forward for future generations.

This program strengthened my confidence in public speaking, leadership, networking, and cultural diplomacy, while also helping clarify my future aspirations in international affairs and service. It showed me how meaningful it can be to serve as a bridge between countries and communities. I am deeply grateful to the Festival staff, mentors, and my fellow Goodwill Ambassadors for their support, teamwork, and friendship throughout this journey. Being a Goodwill Ambassador was more than an honor, it was a gateway that showed me how powerful one person can be in bringing people together, and it inspired me to dedicate my future to making the world better through connection and understanding.





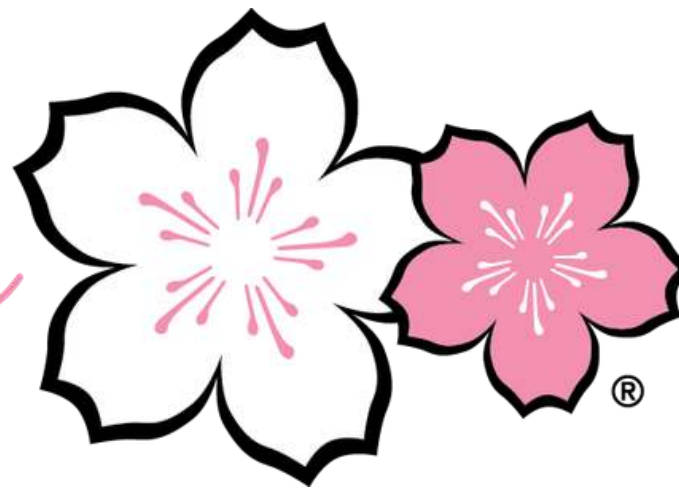
LILY NGUYEN

Serving as a Goodwill Ambassador for the National Cherry Blossom Festival reinforced for me the importance of giving people a sense of hope and connection. Throughout the festival, I engaged with individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, and I came to better understand how meaningful it is to create spaces where people feel welcomed and included. The cherry blossoms are a natural focal point, but what stood out most was how they brought people together: encouraging conversations, shared experiences, and a sense of collective appreciation beyond cultural and national differences.

This experience also contributed directly to my professional development. Through the program, I was able to build connections with individuals working in the U.S.-Japan space, while strengthening my ability to communicate across cultures in a public-facing role. Representing the festival required clarity, adaptability, and cultural awareness, skills that are directly relevant to my future career in international affairs and diplomacy. The opportunity to engage with both domestic and international audiences helped me better understand how to translate cultural and diplomatic significance into accessible, meaningful interactions. Looking ahead, I will carry forward both the relationships and the perspective gained through this program. The experience reinforced the importance of environmental stewardship and the need to care for shared natural spaces like the cherry blossoms. It also highlighted the value of enduring relationships, not only between nations, but between individuals, and the responsibility to continually renew and strengthen those connections over time.



NATIONAL *Cherry Blossom* FESTIVAL



NATSUKI TAKIZAWA

Participating in the National Cherry Blossom Festival's Goodwill Ambassador Program deepened my understanding of cultural exchange as a form of diplomacy. While my previous experiences focused on cultural education and public engagement, this was my first opportunity to engage directly with the broader context of international relations. Through the program, I gained a clearer understanding of how the Festival functions not only as a celebration of culture, but also as a platform where the Japanese Embassy, sponsors, and community partners come together to foster and sustain strong relationships.

This experience highlighted the diplomatic and organizational dimensions of cultural exchange, where consistency, intentionality, and trust are essential in representing and maintaining relationships between nations.

One of the most meaningful aspects of this experience was seeing how the Festival connects with the local community through individual interactions. Through conversations with visitors at various events, I saw how even brief exchanges could contribute to a larger goal of fostering mutual understanding and goodwill—something that is, in itself, a form of diplomacy. Being part of this process allowed me to see my role not only as a communicator, but as someone contributing to a long-standing relationship between the two countries. This was especially meaningful given my personal connection to the Festival, and I will carry forward a deeper awareness of the role cultural initiatives play in international diplomacy, along with a stronger commitment to contributing to these efforts with thoughtfulness and intention.





WIWIN SURYANI

Participating in the Goodwill Ambassador Program for the National Cherry Blossom Festival highlighted for me the value of cultural understanding as a key practice of cultural diplomacy. As liaisons, we were regularly in the presence of diplomats and high-profile guests, and navigating those spaces pushed me to be more aware and intentional in how I engaged across cultural differences. During our visit to the Japanese Ambassador's Residence, I saw this firsthand. Through conversations with guests about the GWA Program, discussions about what it means to work in the foreign policy field, or even brief exchanges in Japanese, I saw tangibly how cultural understanding and communication form the foundation of relationship-building, both between individuals and across nations.

Another experience that stayed with me was during Petalpalooza and the Blossom Kite Festival, where the Goodwill Ambassador Program team hosted a Friendship Bracelets booth for the public. Again and again, we heard, "Thank you so much for doing this." I was struck by how such a small, simple activity could create moments of joy and bring people together. It taught me that intentionality and inclusivity go a long way in meaningful community engagement.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to be part of the GWA Program, and for the lessons it has given me—lessons that I will continue to carry forward in both my personal and professional journey.

