

Hello everyone. My name is Anastasia Kanakasabesan, I am a senior at Eastlake high school, and I have the pleasure of speaking with all of you for this afternoon.

What does it mean to “belong?”

Take a moment and think about that – not as a definition, but as a feeling.

When I was asked to speak at today’s event, I was honored... and then immediately stuck. Belonging is one of those words we use all the time, yet it’s incredibly hard to explain. It shows up in the media, in conversations about identity, and even in the stories we grow up with – the question every teen movie seems to ask: *Where do I fit?*

For me, I would say I fit in having an active voice in maintaining choir or involving myself more in school through pursuits like implementing a district curriculum. So maybe belonging looks simple from outside. Maybe it looks like involvement. Participation. Showing up.

A couple of weeks ago, I was babysitting my neighbor’s 8-year-old, and I asked him this same question: “What does it mean to belong?”

Seems like a loaded question for an 8-year-old, and he thought so too as his initial answer was “I don’t know.” He thought about it for a while longer and finally said, “it means fitting in with people who like the same thing as you.”

And in that simple answer, he captured something powerful.

Belonging begins with connection.

This year, I’ve started noticing how many communities shape who we are.

There’s family – the place where you can sit on the couch, laugh, feel safe, and just be yourself.

There’s where we live. Here in Washington, we’re surrounded by evergreens, mountains, and of course, rain. We hike, ski, bike, and explore. Even in our differences, we share a connection – to nature, to place, to each other.

There’s also the community within ourselves. Our bodies are networks of connection. Our thoughts, creativity, beliefs, and questions – those connection shape who we become and lay the groundwork for more to form.

I can’t take credit for these ideas. They come from the young reflection artists we’re here to celebrate today, whose work reminds us how many ways connection can exist.

But I'd like to add one more: cultural community.

I come from a multi-cultural background, and part of that is being Latina. But I didn't grow up speaking Spanish. I didn't feel confident speaking outside of a high school classroom. That was until this past October when I joined Mariachi.

I didn't know how to play guitar.

I wasn't sure I'd pronounce every word correctly.

And honestly, it was intimidating to step into a room where others seemed so comfortable.

But something incredible happened.

On day one, in a space that felt unfamiliar, I felt like I belonged.

Not because I was perfect.

Not because I had it all figured out.

But because I was welcomed into a community.

And that when it became clear to me:

Belonging is not about proving yourself first. Belonging happens when connection comes before perfection.

When we look around this room today – at the artwork, the people, and the stories – we see community everywhere. And if we listen closely, we'll discover communities we didn't even know existed.

When we're younger, belonging feels easy. Remember how easy it was to make a friend on the playground and you felt like you had just found your new best friend. My neighbor's son feels it with people who love Legos as much as he does. And maybe that community will change as he grows – and that's okay.

Because belonging is not one place.

It's not one group.

It's not one version of yourself that stays the same forever.

Communities change.

We change.

And the way we find belonging changes too.

So the question isn't really, "Where do I belong?"

The better question is: "How do we create belonging – for ourselves and for others?"

We create it when people feel safe.

When they feel seen.

When differences are welcomed, not erased.

When someone can walk into a room unsure... and leave feeling connected.

Belonging doesn't come from fitting into a mold.

It comes from building spaces where people don't have to.

Because at the end of the day, belonging isn't something we find.

It's something we build.

In our families.

In our schools.

In our cultures.

In ourselves.

And when we choose connection – again and again – we create community.

And when we create community – that's where belonging lives.

Thank you.