

Esmeralda Gaytan Espino, Ana G. Mendez '28**How do you work with or lead a team?**

I lead the way I would want to be led, with honesty, empathy, and follow-through. I'm someone who believes that people do their best work when they feel seen and supported, not pressured or micromanaged. When I lead a team, I take time to truly listen first whether that means understanding someone's ideas, concerns, or even the realities of what they're juggling outside of school.

I'm very intentional about being present and reliable. If I say I'll do something, I make sure it gets done, because I know how much trust matters in a team. I also try to be the person others feel comfortable coming to when something isn't going right.

As someone who worked full-time before dental school and now balances academics with leadership roles, I understand how demanding this space can be. That perspective shapes how I lead, for example, I'm flexible when needed, clear about expectations, and always respectful of people's time and energy. To me, leadership isn't about authority; it's about showing up for others and making sure no one feels like they're carrying the weight alone.

What leadership experiences have equipped you for the District Trustee role?

My leadership journey has been shaped by moments where I had to step up not for myself, but for others who trusted me to represent them. As President of my ASDA chapter and District 5 Advocacy Chair, I've learned how to balance organization, communication, and advocacy while carrying the responsibility of representing an entire student body.

One of the most meaningful experiences for me was serving as a delegate at ASDA Annual Session during my first year. Being in the House of Delegates and helping amend a resolution that initially excluded U.S. territories made the importance of representation very real to me. That experience taught me that advocacy is not passive, it requires preparation, confidence, and the willingness to speak up when something isn't right. It showed me how easily voices can be overlooked if no one is willing to raise their hand.

Outside of ASDA, my background in human resources and team management has shaped how I communicate, problem-solve, and lead with empathy. As a first-generation student, I understand how access to information and mentorship can change someone's entire trajectory. All of these experiences have prepared me to serve as a District Trustee who leads with intention, integrity, and a deep respect for the students I represent.

Why are you interested in the District Trustee role and what do you hope to accomplish in this position?

I am interested in the District Trustee role because I know firsthand what it feels like to care deeply about ASDA while still feeling slightly outside of the larger conversation. As a student in Puerto Rico, I have experienced how geographic distance and limited visibility can unintentionally create gaps between our schools and those on the mainland, these are gaps in communication, access, and representation. I want to serve in this role to help close those gaps, not just structurally, but on a human level.

In this position, I hope to be a true bridge between dental schools in PR and those on the mainland. We are not just students in different locations, we are future colleagues who will one day share referral networks, collaborate across specialties, advocate together, and serve overlapping communities. Building those interpersonal connections early is vital, because the relationships we form now shape the profession we inherit later.

I also hope to make district leadership feel more personal and accessible, someone students feel comfortable reaching out to with questions, concerns, or ideas. I want to help create spaces where collaboration feels natural, perspectives are respected, and students from U.S. territories are fully included in district conversations.

This role matters to me because representation has changed my own experience in ASDA, and connection has made me feel like I belong. If selected, I would serve with intention, heart, and a deep commitment to strengthening the relationships that will carry us forward as colleagues and leaders in dentistry.

What are 2-3 issues important to dental students?

The most pressing issues facing dental students is student debt. For me, this isn't an abstract policy issue, it's something I think about every time I plan my future. Because of my background, I don't have family members who can guide me through loan repayment or fall back on financial safety nets, which makes the weight of debt feel real and very personal. I have seen classmates question specialty interests or service-oriented careers because of financial pressure. That reality is what drives me to care so deeply about loan reform, financial transparency, and helping students feel informed and confident enough to advocate for changes that directly affect their lives.

Another issue that matters deeply to me is access to care and workforce shortages. Studying in Puerto Rico has shown me how entire communities can struggle to access consistent dental care, not because of a lack of need, but because of systemic barriers. Many students want to serve these communities, yet feel discouraged by limited incentives and overwhelming debt. I believe students can be motivated to advocate for policies that make service sustainable, not sacrificial.

Lastly, student wellness and burnout are issues I have personally felt and witnessed. Balancing dental school with leadership roles has taught me how easy it is to feel stretched thin. What has made the difference for me is feeling supported and not alone. Creating spaces where students can be honest, supported, and heard is essential for shaping dentists who lead with empathy, resilience, and purpose.