

NATIONAL MALL GATEWAY

“It’s a Mosaic.”

One Teacher Librarian’s Vision for Civic Learning Without Borders

With the National Mall Gateway, Dr. Melaney Sanchez is turning America’s Front Yard into a living classroom for every child.

“Is it possible to stay a little longer? I really like the way this monument makes me feel.”

A fourth-grade boy quietly asked just before his class group moved on from the Vietnam Women’s Memorial on the National Mall. His guide, Ranger Jen, had asked the children to simply stand and notice what the monument held. He did. He took it in.

It is a moment Dr. Melaney Sanchez describes that stays with you. As a teacher librarian, Sanchez doesn’t teach the Vietnam War to elementary students; she teaches them the value of the monuments and what they hold. But getting children ready for that kind of encounter used to mean something far less elegant.

“Before we had the Gateway, I was literally having to buy every book I could find, put Post-it notes on them, read certain pages, and hope that somehow my chaotic approach was going to bring it together for these kids.”

Now, ahead of field trips to the National Mall, she goes straight to the Gateway.

The [National Mall Gateway](https://gateway.nationalmall.org) is a free, 100% web-based civic learning platform launched on Constitution Day, September 17, 2025, by the Trust for the National Mall in partnership with the National Park Service. Built for students, educators, families, and visitors, it brings the monuments, memorials, and stories of America’s most iconic civic space to any classroom or home, anywhere in the world. At its core, it is an invitation to explore, prepare, and wonder. For Sanchez, it became something more personal than a platform. “It’s a mosaic,” she said.



How It Began: A Chance Conversation, and a Question That Changed Everything

Dr. Melaney Sanchez is a teacher librarian at Mount Harmony Elementary School, a Blue Ribbon school in Calvert County, Maryland. With 33 years of teaching experience, and the last 10 of them in the library, Sanchez currently teaches 30 classes a week, covering every grade level. Her school serves approximately 620 students, many from military families.

She has been recognized as a 2026 White House History Teacher Institute Master Teacher and is a 2026 Teaching America250 Award recipient, a National Geographic Grosvenor Fellow, a Fulbright Teachers for Global Classrooms Fellow, and an NEA Global Learning Fellow. She has collaborated with educators in South Korea, France, and Costa Rica. She will spend this summer in the Galápagos.

None of these honors, she will tell you, are the point. The point is the kids.

It started three years ago with National Park Service Ranger Jen who came to Mount Harmony for a STEAM activity.

“She said she was bringing [a class from another school] to the Mall the next day, and I said, ‘Wait, I want to take kids to the Mall.’ She said, ‘Who would you bring?’ And that’s a conundrum, because I teach the whole school. And I said, ‘Well — the whole school.’ She said, ‘Let’s do it.’”

So they did. Every grade. Including kindergarten, who rode to the top of the Washington Monument. Sanchez designed a different trip for each grade level.

The following year, the children came back to her with a question:
“Where are the women?”

That question launched a year-long inquiry around the missing women’s monument. Students made art projects. They built model monuments. They studied Eleanor Roosevelt. They submitted ideas to WomensMonument.org for the planned women’s suffragists monument at 19th and Constitution — *and they were just getting started.*

And the Gateway was woven through all of it, the thread that continues to shape the mosaic.





“I Can Get You There!” | Access, Equity, and the Classroom Without Walls

Mount Harmony Elementary is about an hour from Washington, D.C. Most of Sanchez’s students have visited the National Mall more than once. But Sanchez has never thought of the Gateway as only a tool for students who already have access. She thinks of it as a tool for *everyone*.

That conviction took shape, unexpectedly, in South Korea. A Fulbright colleague had invited Sanchez to an English teacher’s conference in Sejong. When local teachers asked about her work, she opened the Gateway and showed them.

“They all said, ‘We dream of coming to Washington, D.C. I don’t know if I’ll ever meet that dream.’ And I said, ‘Oh, I can get you there. I can get your students there.’”

The teachers leaned in. Someone asked how much it cost. “It doesn’t cost anything. It’s free,” Sanchez said.

Sanchez lives for collecting moments like this. She thinks about teachers in Canada, in Korea, or even in just the next county over, all of them landing in the same place: a free, open window onto the monuments, the memorials, the walking tours, and interactive maps of America’s Front Yard.



I think once people understand what’s here, and realize that it’s literally at their fingertips, they’ll be able to integrate it. But I just think [the Gateway] is still a secret.”

— Dr. Melaney Sanchez

“Whether they’re preparing because they’re going to have their feet on the ground [at the Mall], or they’ll never go there,” she said, the Gateway closes that gap.

Back at Mount Harmony Elementary, the Gateway closes a smaller gap too. Not every child who prepares for a field trip gets on the bus. “Some parents opt out. Some parents don’t feel comfortable sending their kids to D.C. But those kids still can participate. The students can still know exactly what [the Mall] looks like.”



The Mosaic in Practice: Every Subject, Every Grade

Here is what Sanchez's students know, before they ever set foot on the National Mall: they know the map. They know that the Reflecting Pool is in front of the Lincoln Memorial. They know the Washington Monument rises at the center of the Mall, and that you can see it from the beginning of the Vietnam Wall. They know FDR served four terms, because there are four rooms in his memorial.

They know this because Sanchez built a resource portal that puts the Gateway two clicks away from every student the moment they open their school computers. "They literally go on [the Gateway], and they're like, 'I bet you can't find me. Which monument am I at?' They make up games amongst themselves."

But the Gateway's reach doesn't stop at social studies. Sanchez's cross-curricular argument is, in her words, simple: "Pick your topic! It exists."

Art? The symbolism embedded in every carved surface and the stories students uncover when they look closely. Engineering? Last year, the school hosted Dr. Linda Booth Sweeney, author of *Monument Maker*, who walked students through the engineering of how monuments are built. Math? The World War II Memorial, where one gold star does not represent one soldier.

"Want to do the Civil War? Well, isn't that interesting; the troops camped right there on the National Mall during the Civil War."

Literature? The letters left leaning against the Vietnam Wall, primary sources written to names carved in stone.



“

[Students] love it because they can go to the Mall every day of the week anytime they're on their computers.”

— Dr. Melaney Sanchez

“History Shapes Us.” | Children Find Their Voices, and Themselves

There is a fifth-grade boy, three years of field trips behind him, who drew a yellow rose with a fistful of thorns. He was designing something for the planned women’s monument.

Sanchez asked him why so many thorns. He said, “Well, that’s obvious. It has so many thorns, because there’s been so much pain and suffering to get where we are today. For women.”

This is the arc Sanchez is building. Not toward a test score. Not toward a field trip. Toward something she phrases this way, borrowing from author Linda Booth Sweeney, and making it her own: **“What we say here at this school is: history shapes us. How will you shape history?”**

These children are not passive recipients of civics. They are submitting monument ideas to WomensMonument.org. They are standing at the Vietnam Wall and reading letters left by strangers. They are teaching their chaperones and parents the names of every memorial on the Mall’s map. They are asking, sincerely, to stay a little longer.

Sanchez is clear-eyed about what the Gateway makes possible, and what it doesn’t replace. “You can’t prepare them for how they’re going to feel. But you can prepare them to be scholars for life.”

That preparation is the Gateway’s gift. The encounter at the Vietnam Women’s Memorial monument, the yellow rose with its thorns — those belong to the children. They arrive at them because a teacher created the conditions. Because she gave them the map, the context, the confidence. Because, two clicks from their school computers, America’s Front Yard was already waiting.

Experience History. Inspire the Future.

Ready to bring America’s Front Yard into your classroom? Create a free National Mall Gateway educator account to access walking tours, interactive maps, lesson-ready resources, and more, at no cost. **Sign up and start exploring at gateway.nationalmall.org/en.**



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