

Rafael Bitanga

June Nelson Memorial Scholarship

(750 words or less): *How has your educational experience defined you and how do you think it will affect your future?*

Having spent the first half of my life in the Philippines, and the second half on Kodiak as a Filipino immigrant, my childhood was a unique blend of cultures. I learned to walk the tightrope between my two identities. In the Philippines, I grew up in a neighborhood where living in poverty was the reality of life. I watched my neighborhood friends struggle to divide a loaf of bread between their family of seven. After immigrating to the US, my parents worked multiple jobs, and I rarely saw them. On Kodiak, when I left the house in the mornings, I would adopt my English-speaking persona. I had to be confident and assertive and fend for myself. As I walked through my doorway in the evenings, I sank back into my Ilocano language – my parents' native dialect – that allowed me to truly feel at home.

Immigrating to the US at nine years old made it hard to relate to the Filipino Americans who were born and raised in the United States. Living in a low-income immigrant family, I had to contribute financially, so when I was fourteen, I utilized the knowledge I gained from my Personal Finance and Culinary Arts Class and started my own businesses that function both by priority of purpose and principle of profit. Developing these businesses motivated my passion for hospitality and entrepreneurship.

For the past four years, I have owned and managed a crepe stand at the Kodiak Crab Festival. I employ high school students to help them earn income, gain culinary arts experience, and develop interpersonal skills. As a business owner, I follow a collaborative leadership model. I do not give commands; I set an example for the people I work with to ensure that everyone can visually learn and have a positive working experience. My success at the festival encouraged me

to invest in food and prepare meals for over 100 of our homeless community members throughout the year, especially during the holidays.

In addition to academics, I invested countless hours to improve my leadership skills by joining an extracurricular activity called “Family, Career and Community Leaders of America” (FCCLA). As one of ten National Officers, we collectively serve 165,000 young people nationwide, as we enlist support from the business community and lobby for funding for youth higher education programs. In this process, I am often asked to tell my story as an example of leadership development. Also, FCCLA has prepared me to thrive in high pressure environments by allowing me to experience cooking in commercial kitchens, participating in national culinary art competitions, and organizing national leadership conferences. On several occasions, my adviser trusted me to plan and execute full-service catering for local events, including our Special Olympics Organization dinner where I led fifteen students to serve over 300 attendees. My involvement in the kitchen helped me to cultivate techniques in managing the back-of-the-house, creating an efficient production line, overseeing pastry making, and offering front-of-the-house table service.

In July 2016, my classmate lost her arm in an ATV accident. I harnessed my FCCLA knowledge and passion for cooking to organize a fundraiser for her benefit. I asked friends and family to help with the spaghetti feed and, before long, many community members became involved. We had lines of patrons like one would see on Black Friday. Once we served everyone, my hands transitioned from holding kitchen utensils to playing the piano to comfort the guests. I used every part of myself to create a hospitable environment that served over 500 people and raised more than \$12,000 to help this girl’s single mother cover medical expenses.

Despite being 5,000 miles away from my home country, because of the American Education System, I was allowed to continue to work to enrich the lives in our surrounding neighborhood and our new community. I now seek an education and career path where I can combine my culinary, entrepreneurial, and leadership skills. I dream of owning and managing a mission-driven fine dining restaurant with an innovative team who will help me welcome customers and confront food insecurity through service-projects. As a first-generation college student who will attend a top university, I ultimately envision visiting my home in the Philippines and using my entrepreneurial skills, helping my family improve their lives and providing free cooking classes for youth. I also hope to intertwine my experience, college education, and Ilocano hospitality to continue as an entrepreneur who develops leaders, supports communities, and unites people around both the table and common issues.