

My Gateway to Alaska

After a grueling four-hour hike, I finally reach the small sign that marks the end of my trek and set my backpack down. I look around and am surrounded by mountains in every direction. I sit down and am in a state of disbelief that this is the island I have the pleasure to live on. The island, Revillagigedo, is located in Southeast Alaska, harboring the quaint town of Ketchikan, my home. I have not always called Ketchikan home, but its remote charm has given me an experience unlike any other.

Ketchikan was not something I expected. It was a last resort because my dad was in need of a job, and the only one was in Ketchikan. The move wasn't something I was excited about. Moving into a new high school is hard enough, but what made it harder was its unexpectedness. In Albemarle High School — the high school that I initially attended in Charlottesville, Virginia — I ran for club positions and applied for honors societies. Those prospects all came to an end on August 1st, 2015.

Ketchikan greeted me with one of its common days of down pouring rain, so we weren't off to a great start. Then the town started to grow on me. I got a job at a local restaurant and experienced interacting with the tens of thousands of cruise ship passengers who come through the port. The job not only gave me more responsibility than I'd previously experienced, but also let me work and connect with people from all walks of life. I've met people from all over the world, all wanting to experience the "Last Frontier." The job gave me an appreciation for the beauty of Ketchikan. Even as I look out my window now, I see and appreciate the ocean and mountains surrounding me.

As the summer winded down, so did the restaurant. I started school at Ketchikan High School, or "Kayhi." Kayhi is about a fourth the size of my previous school. Fortunately the size didn't stop me from excelling. I enrolled in a challenging course load and joined the local USFS Youth Advisory Committee that gives written and verbal input to the Tongass National Forest Plan Amendment. I (and the rest of the committee) better the environment by increasing community awareness of the need for regulated buffer zones. My time on the advisory committee has afforded me a better understanding of the local rainforest embodying the area and the role that rainforest plays in my local and state economy.

I also participate in the Kayhi soccer team, enduring many cold and harsh practices in the pouring rain. These bitter practices all pay off, as teams in Southeast Alaska all travel to their games by either plane or ferry. The most unusual and best part of these trips is that the opposing high school's athletes house us. This type of housing situation gives Southeast Alaska a sense of community, and teammates become best friends due to the time-spent everyday with them.

Living in Ketchikan has given me a greater appreciation for nature and made me realize I want to help protect the pristine forest that surrounds me. In college I plan on majoring in chemical engineering with a minor in environmental engineering. With this degree I'd like to help build more renewable resources in Alaska, specifically hydroelectric plants. In college I also hope to learn how hydroelectric plants affect the environment so I can develop a system that does minimal damage to the Alaskan ecosystem, specifically salmon, as it is another major revenue for Alaska.

I have learned to love Ketchikan and all of its quirks. Sure, I may have to wait a couple of weeks to see a highly-anticipated movie as older movies cycle through our small movie theater, but this is easy to overlook as I am exposed to living in remote Alaska. I step out my door and am surrounded by immense beauty, and am a five-minute drive from some of the best hiking trails I have ever experienced. I had low expectations for what Ketchikan could offer me, but it proved me wrong, and I ended up with something that no one else in the United States has: a close knit community in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness.