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29 March 2022
June Nelson Memorial Scholarship

The theme of the 2021 AASB Annual Conference is "Working Toward Equity and Inclusion." In light of recent messages and actions nationwide supporting respect for all peoples, please describe how you will move forward as a young adult to advocate for others and do your part to support equity and inclusion.

Health equity, as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is when "all members of society enjoy a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible." The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has called attention to the harms of systemic social and racial injustice in healthcare, and has proven that health equity has not been achieved in our country.

As school and extracurriculars became virtual in 2020, I suddenly had time to try out new activities. In the fall of that year, I joined the Sitka Youth Leadership Committee (SYLC) where I was given the opportunity to deepen my understanding of equity, respect, and healthy relationships and to promote positive norms in my community. My long-time interest in medicine and public health also began to develop into a more complete vision of working towards more inclusive, equitable care for all after understanding the obstacles many groups face in accessing quality care.

As I attend university as a young adult, I plan to continue to participate in groups similar to SYLC that promote education around social injustices. Participating in our democracy through public testimony to advocate for issues I care about has also been a large part of my identity that I plan to continue. I have already advocated for better environmental and subsistence protections in our state at both local and out of town hearings, and in the future, I plan to testify on issues related to healthcare.

Specifically in Alaska it is critical to understand the relationship between disparities in accessibility to preventative care and the overall wellbeing of the population. For example, Alaska has among the country's highest rates of suicide and STI's, while healthcare in some areas can cost up to 70 percent higher than that of the lower 48. Someday I hope to hold public office so that I can take meaningful strides in improving our state and country's healthcare system.

My interests in promoting better access to quality preventative care do not end with governmental involvement, however. I have also always been personally fascinated by health and the human body, and after taking a course on medical terminology, I realized that I want to become a doctor. As an undergraduate at Brown University, I plan to concentrate in human biology so that I can deepen my understanding of people both scientifically and socioculturally. I believe this duality of knowledge will be critical in being a quality doctor and also in understanding different opinions in government. From there, I hope to attend medical school with the help of the National Health Service Corps and work in a community underrepresented by healthcare workers for the first few years post-graduation. Finally, I plan to move back to Alaska to work as a general practitioner to personally give back to the community that has raised me.

I truly believe that working towards equity and inclusion is an evergoing process. In the future, I hope to contribute to our nation's efforts in both areas through promoting community education on social issues, personally providing equitable medical care to others, and fighting for a more just healthcare system as a public office holder some day.