

Lillian “Jing” O’Brien

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June Nelson Memorial Scholarship

My passion for politics was born at the state capital. Standing before the Board of Education, I testified against SB 39, which proposed a \$20 million budget cut to public school districts across Alaska. Later, while advocating to over 45 legislators for mental health funding, I truly realized the power of my voice.

I live in an island community in southeast Alaska with a population barely exceeding 2,500 people. As the state of Alaska continues to decrease crucial funding to public education, rural students with already limited resources and opportunities are negatively impacted. Paper is rationed, extracurricular activities are cut, and critical post secondary support is not prioritized. Year after year, a large percentage of Wrangell’s graduates become college dropouts or don’t attend any form of higher education at all. As the student delegate for my district, I had the opportunity to travel to the Alaska state capital and advocate to legislatures for the funding that my peers depend on. While there, I was surprised to find my opinions and ideas were heard and valued. With each legislator’s office I walked into, I became more confident in myself and my voice. The conversations I engaged in were fascinating and impactful. And by the end, I was inspired to break the negative cycle that affects the futures of so many of my classmates.

My time at the capital instilled in me the desire to further improve public education. When I returned home, I began to actively seek out ways to do so both inside and outside the classroom.

Junior year, after witnessing recurring mental health issues in my community, I took initiative and attended a week long mental health training where I became certified to help my peers in crisis. Building upon that experience as a senior, I helped start the first peer mentoring program in my high school and worked with classmates to improve the moral and motivation of the student body. Additionally, I took on the positions of student government president and student representative on the school board to further advocate and address the needs of students. After demonstrating strong opinions desiring more rigorous and engaging classwork, I was chosen to facilitate my school district's curriculum committee, where I lead monthly meetings with administration to discuss and improve the quality of Wrangell's education. To raise young student leaders with the skills to create positive change, I volunteer as the elementary school student council advisor. Some of our projects this year have included a spirit week raising money for cancer, a school wide art contest, and at the end of April, I plan to introduce the students to the school board in order to get them comfortable with talking to administration. Recently, I attended the statewide school board conference and shared my personal story in front of over 400 educators, emphasizing the importance of a strong education system in Alaska.

Advocating for my community has raised, challenged, and inspired me to be an open minded activist wherever I go. I am determined to fight injustice and empower the vulnerable. By pursuing a degree in political science and government, I will continue to promote quality education in my community, state, and across the globe. I am invested in forging a world where every student has equal access to the opportunities and resources necessary for success. After completing my undergraduate degree, I plan to attend law school and obtain the knowledge and

expertise to advocate at a professional level. Within the next 10 years, I hope to be an established attorney, dedicated to addressing disparities and promoting justice.