

Justine Erickson-Bradney

June Nelson Memorial Scholarship

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I grew up in remote rural (Bush) Alaska in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta, in the villages of Toksook Bay, Kipnuk, Kwethluk, Atmoutluak, Napaskiak, Platinum, and Bethel, as my single mother climbed the career ladder. It was in these villages that I was immersed in the Yup'ik cultures and traditions of dancing, beading, storytelling, language, food, subsistence, games like Native Youth Olympics and given the Yup'ik name Ilanaq.

I grew up an only child, me and my mom against the world, with an absentee father. She never wanted anything less than the best for me; to ensure I have a better life than she did. My mother had humble beginnings in a third world nation where education was not readily available. After moving to the USA as a child, she worked hard for everything she had, with little help from others. She always supported and championed me, knowing when to push and when to ease up, to do my best to reach my dreams.

Before school age, around 18 months old, I watched my mother write papers for her second master's degree. I became infatuated, studied and copied her and learned to hold a pencil and scribble down "words", meaningful ones. At the age of 3 I looked up at my mom as she received her second master's degree and asked her if I could have one too. She told me I could have whatever I wanted so long as I worked for it. My American grandpa calls this her "immigrant mentality".

At age 4, I started preschool with a secret. I had learned to read. My mom always read my bedtime stories with great expression. She encouraged me to "read" to myself by telling the story using the pictures coming off the page or to "write" her a story, while she cooked and did chores. I pretended I did not know how to read, around her, because I thought it meant she would stop reading to me. I did however begin to read to the kids and teachers at preschool because I loved reading like her. When they told her, she did not believe them because she never formally taught me or expected me to read until school started. One day she caught me reading. She still read my bedtime stories. I was relieved.

I started reading advanced books, two grade levels above, in Kindergarten. My mom protested moving me to grade 2, thinking of the challenges for me because I was shorter, younger (barely 5 years old), and wore loud outfits and glasses. She agreed to grade 1. Still, I was an easy target for physical and verbal bullying. I thrived by focusing on my mom's words about my greatness, my studies, and my career goals. I wanted to be a professional mermaid. Unorthodox yes, but I wanted to be like the women I saw swimming in the aquarium tanks in Denver. I was teased a lot for this and even had to tell the teacher my career goal THREE times before she put it on the board. I was obsessed with mermaids, determined, stubborn and driven.

By grade 5, I wanted to be a geologist because I was enthralled with beautiful geodes and fascinated by fossils. Then rocks got boring. That same year there was a rabies outbreak in my community. When everyone petted, got licked, by an infected puppy, there were rounds of vaccinations for all. Furthermore, I had been watching dogs go unvaccinated and abused. Suddenly, I realize my true passion for animals and a career option through examples of need for veterinary services.

I have loved every second of volunteering at a local animal shelter since the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, even during COVID. Since grade 8, I have been in the ANSEP program, the beginning of my veterinary journey. This May I will receive my Associate of Science in Biology and will be heading to the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) next semester to complete the second half of my bachelor's degree, prerequisites for veterinary school with the UAF/Colorado State University partnered veterinary program. I will then join a practice to help fund public health veterinary outreach services to the communities in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta area. I want to provide for and give back to my adopted culture and people, who put so much into me as I was growing up. I want to be happy and make my mom and my community proud!