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June Nelson Memorial Scholarship

In August, 2019 I took a leap into the unknown and drove 1,200 miles from my home in Oregon to a town called Hyder, Alaska, where I'd spend my senior year. With my parents, who were hired as the only two teachers at a school of 12 kids in grades K-12, we eagerly anticipated this new journey.

Virtually no information, online or otherwise, could be found on Hyder; it was hard to even get in contact with any of the residents. Quickly, I learned why Hyder is officially designated, Alaska's friendliest ghost town.

Upon our arrival in Hyder, we instantly recognized the uniqueness of this desolate community. While Hyder is a hotbed in the summer for tourists seeking bear viewing opportunities, in the winter it's a true ghost town. Less than 40 people live in Hyder, year-round, and it's mostly people over the age of 70. There are few young people here.

Throughout the school year it was great getting to know each member of this special community. Hearing their stories was made easier due to the monthly school potlucks which I helped plan and publicize. To my surprise, not many of the students knew the community members very well, in part because of the generation gap, but also because there weren't many events where people could mingle. Being able to help make these connections and establish relationships with people of different generations has been a great experience for me, something I didn't expect when moving here. Making friends with kids who grew up in Hyder, with limited socialization, has given me much insight as to what life is like in unique communities.

Unfortunately, due to low enrollment and state funding, Hyder School will be closing at the end of this school year. Little did I know that when moving here from a big high school in Oregon, I'd be the only, and final, senior to graduate from Hyder School. The announcement of our school closure, made earlier this month, has been upsetting for everyone in the community.

The school closure has given me the opportunity to counsel my classmates and actually feel how this experience has impacted them. I have been very involved with my peers throughout all of my schooling. Last year I was the junior class president of my high school, with nearly 400 kids in my class. I'm empathetic and have always taken pride in helping others overcome challenges, and this experience in Hyder has been valuable and heartfelt.

In this tiny community, Hyder School plays a big role, from being a social hub, to supporting the economy, to being a place people come to simply chat with one another. I have had a lot of time and many opportunities to work with the elders in this community. I helped them prepare their places for winter, shoveled snow, and helped them get through day-to-day life. We received over 25-feet of snow this winter, which resulted in a lot of shoveling. While most of them aren't working anymore, the elders look to younger people for help, and truly enjoy the monthly potlucks and other school volunteer opportunities that bring everyone together. The gatherings were especially appreciated in the winter, when it's easy to be reclusive and impacted by the darkness and cold weather.

I have always wanted to be a high school teacher, and am blessed to have had this experience in Hyder. With all that's happened this school year, not only have I been thankful for the opportunity to help many people, but I'm grateful for what it's done for me. It has helped me refine my goal and future career choices to still be involved in education, but rather than a teacher, I'm most interested in pursuing either guidance counseling or school psychology.

As I prepare for college, I know helping the students in Hyder to accept who they are and offering them advice through this time of uncertainty in their lives, has been a very insightful experience. Ironically, while the students greatly appreciated and benefited from what I was able to offer, I feel it was I who learned even more, and for that, I couldn't be more grateful.