

Kayci Andrews

June Nelson Scholarship

Empowerment

I am a Yup'ik Eskimo and we make up less than one tenth percent of the American population. My native culture has been equated with negative stereotypes for generations, such as: lack of intelligence, alcoholism, and domestic abuse. However, my experience did not teach me despair, hopelessness, and hatred of my culture. They taught me to persevere, love unconditionally, and see the good in others. My hope is that I can someday return to my community after having finished college and earned teacher licensure, prepared to make my village a better place by giving the next generation of Yup'ik youth a role model to follow.

I remember the moment I decided to become a teacher. My mother works at the district office, and I had walked there after school to help her carry her work bag home. As I sat on the front steps I read a novel my mom had got me for Christmas while I waited for her to finish work, I glanced up from my book just as a very large man approached. He stopped, looked at me, then looked at my book. "What are you reading, young lady?" I replied, excited to talk about the book I was enjoying, "Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen." He smiled condescendingly at me and said, "Isn't that a bit difficult for you? Maybe you should read something that is written more at your level." He continued to ascend the stairs and disappeared into the office. See, the implication of his statement was clear. He had never met me, but assumed that because I am Yup'ik, I am not smart nor educated enough to read that book. I decided then, at that very moment, that I would persevere and prove him wrong. Not only prove him wrong, I would work to change the perception of the academic abilities in my culture.

As I skidded down the trail on my way to spend my mother's last few dollars on powdered milk for my newborn sibling, I stopped to observe two of the town's well known drunks wedged between a rusted out snowmobile and a pile of rotten fish that even the malnourished dog in their yard would not touch. They were fighting and I wondered why. As I watched them exchange punches, and push and shove each other, I saw a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels sitting in the snow; the object of the feud. The blood that ran down both of their faces helped me realize the importance of the bottle to each man, and the lengths they were willing to go to in order to obtain it. I had sympathy for the starving dog, tied to a two-foot-long chain, never to leave that spot for his entire life. A sight I have come to know well in my 17 years. I know the inherent goodness of my people; I know their deeply held values, their work ethic, their desire to

help their fellow man, but tonight, and most nights, the evidence of those values was in short supply. As unruly as my village sounds, I am still proud to be a part of my community.

My strongest supporter is my mother. She is the one who wakes me up every day with a smile on her face, reassuring me that I have what it takes to conquer the world. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be the person I am today and I couldn't thank her enough. She is the one who inspired me to become a teacher. She taught me how to read, write, and do simple math.

"Be the change you want to see in the world" are the wise words of Mahatma Gandhi. These are the words I live by and strongly believe in. There are not many Alaskan Native teachers. The school in my village is taught by outsiders. This has negatively impacted the culture of my village for generations. This needs to change. I am going to be one of the few Alaskan Natives that finish college and become a teacher. I am going to break the stereotype that was being perpetuated by the large man on the steps at the district office. I can't change the past, I can't do it all, but I can get the ball rolling in my village and set an example for the next generation to follow. I am going to be the change that I want to see.