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June Nelson Memorial Scholarship 2nd Year Application

After attending school in rural Alaska for twelve years, I saw college as an opportunity to gain access to unlimited educational resources that lay beyond the shores of my small island community. My vision of success was to attend an Ivy League university and continue into a high salary career path. Midway through my senior year everything changed. I was not accepted into my dream schools and I was forced to commit to a college that did not align with my values.

Due to COVID19, college became a ghost of everything I had imagined. Knowing that online education would neither challenge or engage me, I planned a gap year. Still determined to learn and grow outside the conventional college setting, I discovered Outer Coast Year (OCY), a college-level postsecondary program in Sitka, Alaska. Its small student body allowed the program to operate in-person, despite the pandemic. Although it was an unexpected change from the original path I had envisioned for myself, I decided to take a chance. I applied and was accepted.

OCY is founded on three main pillars: Academics, Service/Labor and Self-Governance. This program has given me the freedom to shape my own education, while developing a unique understanding of what it means to be a productive community member.

Academics: I am enjoying the experience of seminar style courses for the first time and exploring fascinating topics such as the philosophy surrounding Animal Ethics and the vulnerability of Creative Writing.

Service/Labor: By volunteering for a nonprofit called Sitkans Against Family Violence, I am currently raising awareness on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in the Sitka community and diving deeper into its impact on the Indigenous population. Through daily labor responsibilities, I am gaining a new appreciation for unglamorous tasks such as cooking meals in a commercial kitchen and cleaning the facilities for the Outer Coast community.

Self-Governance: As a member of the first cohort of OCY, I actively collaborated to build the foundation of the self-governance pillar. By participating in biweekly student body meetings that provide governance to our community and addressing future orientated actions such as admitting new applicants, hiring future staff, and reshaping written policies, I have discovered the power of using my voice to create productive change.

Although I grew exponentially from a more holistic view on education, the amount of responsibility that comes with the student governed program is challenging. The structure of Outer Coast consumes every second of every day. The more invested I became in the Outer Coast community, the more leadership roles and responsibilities I accepted. When not in class, cooking meals, or engaging in service, I volunteered to promote committee proposals, facilitate Student Body meetings, and share ideas with administration. Often I found myself overwhelmed, yet incapable of giving up responsibilities that would affect the student body. I learned to balance time spent as a community member with my individual life outside the program.

On a broader scale, I struggled with letting go of my original vision of postsecondary education and accepting the new one. I came to OCY with a preconceived future, only to gradually learn that everything I thought I wanted had changed and that terrified me. While I filled critical roles such as designing the student admission process and preserving institutional memory, I soon found that completing mundane jobs, like washing dishes after a long dinner shift, could be equally as satisfying and essential to the function of the community. Instead of viewing education as a way to further myself as an individual, I began to see education as a tool to build community and give back to others.

Through my learning experiences outside the classroom, I realized that education is so much more than prestigious degrees and good grades. My advice to all high school seniors is: *Your future is not limited by your definition of success at age eighteen. Life is constantly evolving and so will your perspectives. Be open minded to all the possibilities even if some scare you.* I knew that attending OCY would alter my post-secondary path forever, but by taking that chance, I transformed my view on education and found a new definition of success. I was inspired to apply to my new version of a dream school and was accepted into Pomona College. Although I plan to continue my postsecondary path away from Outer Coast next year, the values I learned here will forever empower me to challenge and adapt my perspective on education wherever my community may be.