

Rylee Lekanoff

June Nelson Memorial Scholarship Essay

My whole life, I had only ever wanted to be a farmer. Through Elementary school that is all I'd ever wanted to be. My dreams began to shift in middle school before being completely jostled around in High School. In High School, I wanted to be a photographer, elementary school teacher, art teacher, and costume designer. Then I entered my junior year of high school where I enrolled in our school's Fisheries and Hatcheries class. This is when Marine Biology came into the picture.

I started the class for fun, and for an excuse to get out of taking another science class, but it quickly became my favorite class. Every day, I looked forward to sixth period so that I could go to the hatchery and care for our Silver Salmon Fry.

At the beginning of the school year, we learned about different kinds of salmon, their lifecycles, and pretty much everything we could learn about salmon. We soon began taking surveys of how many salmon and what kinds of salmon we saw in the river. When the number of silver salmon that reached the river and was high enough, we set a seine net across the river to catch our fish. We had a permit to catch three mature males and three mature females, to collect milt and eggs from them. We then fertilized the eggs and placed them in the incubator to "eye up" or to turn them into eyed eggs. Then it was just a waiting game until they hatched and eventually turned into fry. Our teacher made the wait everything but boring. We studied tides and moon phases, different kinds of boats and fisheries, cohesion and water surface tension, water quality and water properties, and many other topics to get us through the long winter months.

Throughout the time we got to take care of these fish, I began to have a growing interest in Marine Biology. I began learning about little topics in class and then going down rabbit holes for those topics in my free time. I fell so far into these topics that eventually I became so far into the subject that I couldn't be bothered with any other career.

At the end of the school year, our science teacher announced that this would be his last year teaching. He explained how the new teacher would most likely need help navigating the class seeing as there was no real curriculum for it. He mentioned this mainly to us from the junior class seeing as we would be here again the following year. I did my best to get my foot in the door with administrators to allow me to enter the class as a teacher assistant even though our school “doesn’t do that” but I fought as hard as I could. There were several of us who were trying to get this position which made the fight even more difficult. Eventually after much pushing and hoping, the school allowed me to use my sixth hour as a career exploration, in which I was allowed to act as the Teaching Assistant for the 2023-2024 Fisheries Program.

This school year I have done much of what I did in my class last year, however this year I have also taught miniature lessons on water quality tests and hatchery operations. In October, I was able to explain, teach, and guide the fish take (where we caught the fish to harvest eggs and milt). Throughout this program, I have even considered bringing teaching back into my career along with Marine Biology.

As an indigenous person from a tribe, I’ve always had a lot of respect and interest in the ocean. I’m a member of the Qawalangin Tribe of Unalaska, a group called the Unangan, who have lived off of the ocean for more than 9,000 years. “Qawalangin” means “Sons of the Sea Lion” and all pinnipeds (sea lions, sea otters, seals, etc.) are highly respected and important in our community. Since finding my interest in Marine Biology, I have also started to get closer to my culture, participating in every dance, class, or event hosted by my tribe. This has encouraged me to bring my future education back to my community. With pinnipeds so important to my people I have decided to make them my focus. I’m not pursuing this for personal gain, I am doing this for my people.