

Camai,

My name is Saelah Berns, and I am from Old Harbor, Alaska. My village is more than just home—it is the foundation of my identity, culture, and values. My family has lived here for generations, carrying forward the traditions of our Alutiiq ancestors. The land and sea have always provided for us, shaping the way we live, work, and connect. Some of my fondest memories are berry picking with my grandmother, fishing commercially with my father, and learning to make teas and salves from local plants. These traditions have instilled in me a deep respect for my heritage and the knowledge passed down through generations.

The summer before eighth grade, I underwent spinal fusion surgery for severe scoliosis. The twelve-hour procedure left me with two steel rods and thirteen screws securing my spine. Recovery was more painful than I could have imagined. For a year, my movements were restricted, and I couldn't participate in the activities I once loved. I spent that year in Port Lions, a small village without internet or phone service. Life slowed in ways I wasn't prepared for. Simple tasks became overwhelming, and while my body healed, I had to find new ways to fill my time. I read book after book, took guitar lessons from my Uncle Willie, and found comfort in family.

One of the moments that stayed with me was when my Auntie Anna, who had recently attended esthetician school, brought over her facial machine and gave me facials. She explained how skincare was a form of self-care, and for the first time, I followed a skincare routine. In those quiet moments, I felt a sense of peace. It wasn't just about the products—her touch, knowledge, and care nurtured me when I needed it most. Meanwhile, my grandmother would bring me plants she had harvested—calina berries, fiddlehead ferns, and fireweed shoots. Although I couldn't join her, she still found a way to include me. Through these small gestures, my family reminded me that even when I couldn't actively participate in life, I was still deeply connected to it.

That year of healing taught me more than patience and resilience—it showed me the power of care, both from others and for myself. My aunt's kindness sparked my passion for esthetics, making me realize that self-care isn't just about appearance; it's about feeling whole. This fall, I will be attending the Aveda Institute in Avondale, Arizona, to study esthiology and holistic wellness. My goal is to integrate traditional healing methods with modern skincare practices. My passion was deeply influenced by my experience recovering from surgery. During that time, I found comfort in self-care rituals and learned that skincare is not just about beauty but also about healing and well-being. I want to help others feel confident and healthy while respecting both modern science and Indigenous knowledge.

Attending this program will provide me with the skills and certifications necessary to work in esthetics and open doors to employment opportunities that align with my passion. The education I receive will allow me to return home with valuable expertise, helping me contribute to my community's well-being. Many rural areas, including Kodiak, lack access to specialized skincare

and holistic wellness services. My goal is to bridge that gap by bringing my knowledge back to our people, offering services that enhance physical, mental, and emotional health.

Beyond my career aspirations, I am committed to serving and uplifting my community. Growing up, I was involved in the Nuniaq dance group and the Kodiak Native Youth Council, participating in cultural events, community service projects, and advocacy efforts. These experiences reinforced the importance of giving back and preserving our traditions while embracing new opportunities for growth. I want to be a role model for younger generations, showing them that it is possible to pursue education, explore new paths, and return home with the skills needed to support our people.

Pursuing this education is a significant commitment, but I am determined to make the most of this opportunity. By gaining expertise in esthiology and holistic health, I can help improve my community's well-being while honoring the traditional knowledge that has been passed down for generations. Through esthiology and holistic wellness, I hope to create a space where traditional knowledge and modern practices come together for the benefit of all.

Quyanna for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Saelah Berns