

## June Nelson Memorial Scholarship Essay

I like the essay prompt because it is very different from the usual personal narrative prompts. But for me, the *lack* of a person influenced my direction in life. I struggled with anxiety, and high school was a constant source of stress for me. Unfortunately, there wasn't anyone at the school who was trained to help students who were mentally struggling. The high school did have counselors, but they were only trained in class scheduling, not in actual mental health counseling. And like all the rest of the school staff, they were overworked and underpaid. They just didn't have the time or the training to help the entire student body with their mental health needs.

My issues are pretty minor, I just suffer from some social and test anxiety, but many of my classmates struggled with very serious issues like addiction, bad home lives, depression, and even suicidal thoughts, but they had no one to turn to. And the problem isn't just within the schools either. The nation is facing a mental health crisis and an overall lack of resources to fight it. Within our local community, there is a definite shortage of mental health care, and those few offices that do offer counseling often have incredibly long wait lists.

Personally, I would like to see good mental health awareness and practices taught from an early age within the school. I think that if you start promoting good mental health awareness and open up the conversation when children are young, you teach them good mental health habits early, then they can carry those skills with them for the rest of their lives. The first step to fighting the current mental health crisis is to take away the stigma associated with mental health issues and to teach children from an early age that is okay to ask for help. The lack of mental and emotional support within the schools has directly contributed to the rise in school dropout rates, suicides, and school shootings. Addressing the mental health needs of students when they are young would go a long way towards preventing a mental health crisis when they are older, especially during the difficult teenage years.

I know that I felt the lack of mental health resources and awareness during my years in school, and I would have definitely benefited from having an actual licensed counselor in the school to teach me how to handle my anxiety better. Fortunately, my parents are very supportive,

so they were able to get me the help that I needed to tackle my anxiety issues. But many students don't have good home lives, or open communication with their parents, and their mental health struggles. Without it being addressed, these issues can build up and go on to affect every single aspect of their future lives.

The lack of counseling and emotional awareness within the schools influenced my interest in pursuing a degree in mental health. I was able to see firsthand how there was a lack of support within the school, and within the community overall, and I think that there is a definite need for more mental health support in our area.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I started taking online classes, and I was able to finish my high school requirements very quickly. This allowed me to sign up with the Middle College Program, and start taking college classes at Kenai Peninsula College early. I absolutely love my college classes, and I have thrived in this environment. I have done so well in my college classes that in May, when I graduate from high school, I will also be graduating from KPC with my two-year Associate's degree. I then plan to enroll my Associate's degree into a four-year Bachelor's program. I have been accepted to Colorado Mesa University where I will major in Psychology. Eventually, I plan to get my Doctorate and open a private practice offering Marriage and Family Counseling to support our community in the fight against mental health crises and teach the next generation to communicate about their struggles.