

My name is Alexis Mercurief and I am an Aleut tribal member. Like most Native youth of my generation, I grew up mixed-race and in an Urban environment. During my youth, I heard stories and history about my culture from my grandfather, but the experiences felt far-removed from the life I was living. After graduation, I went on to study psychology at Seattle Pacific University with the help of an annual Aleut Foundation scholarship. Receiving this money not only helped me complete my education, but it spurred me to think more about my tribe- specifically why they would want to support me, and where the funding came from. My tribe's support was always in the back of my mind; each semester's funding a little reminder of all the people I had encouraging me every step of the way. Upon graduating in 2013, I knew I wanted to continue on to graduate school, but was unsure of my path and at the advice of my advisor, I took time off to work for a while.

When applying for jobs, I came across a youth program coordinator position at the Seattle Indian Health Board. With my tribal background, I felt I would be a good fit and I felt a natural pull toward this work with my background in social sciences. During my time at this organization, I provided advocacy and designed academic interventions for Native elementary school children that incorporated each of their individual cultural backgrounds and placed Native values at the forefront of our programming. I was lucky to have several mentors during this time- including bosses, coworkers, and parents of the children in my program- that took my hand guided me in my learning process about the unity and diversity in the vast number of unique Native tribal identities, histories, cultures, and traditions. I met others who, just like me, grew up with multiple identities in an Urban environment and were finding their way back to their cultures despite decades of historical trauma and displacement. During this time I also attended an Aleut Culture Camp which gave me specific exposure to my tribe's culture and traditions.

Four years serving Native youth in Seattle gave me incredible insight into what I wanted my career to look like. In 2017, I was accepted into a doctoral program at Oregon State University where I currently study Human Development- including family and community influences across the lifespan. Specifically, my research is on self-regulation skills in early childhood and kindergarten readiness. My particular interest, however, is learning how young children incorporate the values of their community into their identity- and use that identity to monitor and adjust their own behavior and emotions (self-regulation). I witnessed how powerful it was for children in my youth program to experience a context that was centered around Native

values and surrounded by strong examples of healthy and compassionate Native adults who modeled these values. I watched the children learn who they were and who they wanted to be. This in turn guided their behavior, and led to lasting behavior changes because they were coming from internal (rather than external) sources of motivation. I plan to write my dissertation on the intersection between culture and self-regulation skills in a Native context, and hope to earn my PhD by spring of 2022. My next steps will hopefully include an eventual career in academia as a professor at a research university.

Over the past several years, I finally realized why my tribe wanted to support me with my education. First, on a collective level, the United States government has a contractual obligation to fulfill with regards to providing money to Native tribes as the result of original treaties- money that tribes pass on to their young people. Second, as a Native woman, to complete my education and reach my career goals is a feat that was dreamt of long before me. Completing my education allows me to carry on the legacy of strength and courage of my tribe- something that those who came before me surely hoped and dreamed for the generations that would follow them. Last, the ability to achieve this level of education is not solely for my own benefit- I want to use the skills, talents, and knowledge I have gained to give back to my community. Education is truly the most important tool to impart change- and a powerful way to preserve our culture and heritage for generations to come. I will forever be grateful for everyone in my family, community, and tribe who has encouraged me and provided assistance along the way. I hope that with my career in academia, I can continue teaching future generations and publishing research that will contribute to the health and wellness of Native people across the country.