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**Essay Title: Dena'a Yeets - Our Breath of Life**

I remember everything as if it was yesterday. I was 15 years old and it was a bright, sunny fall afternoon, the day before my freshman year of high school was to begin. That day, I had not a care in the world. I had friends that I spent a lot of time with, a soaring grade point average, an awesome mother and grandmother, and I was a day away from beginning the most exciting four years of my teenage life. What could possibly have gone wrong? And then I heard a family member crying from her bedroom downstairs, and promptly, I went to her room and tried to comfort her. I could not understand what about she was crying, for she was incoherent. She was muttering such things as "compensation" and "leaving." Not understanding what any of this meant at that exact moment, I simply wrote it off and told her everything would be okay while I patted her on the back. And then I made the mistake of leaving the room.

About five minutes later, when I was in my room, I heard her much clearer. She was on the phone with the pharmacist, and through hearing their argument, I had learned that her depression medication had been increased and the reason she had been incoherent was because she was detached from who she usually was, and the dosage she was taking was harming her to the point where it made her manically depressed. She wasn't able to fight the depression because of the medication, and that in turn demoralized her. She was considering suicide.

As my grandmother, mother, and I rushed her to the hospital, we all silently contemplated the magnitude of what had just happened. My grandmother and mother were too stricken by the thought of her leaving this world by her own means to even speak. My family member was completely silent the whole car ride there, almost angry that she couldn't end her life without interference as tears streamed down her face, and I was sitting in the back, my heart pounding in my chest, emotions coursing through my entire being, realizing that though the circumstances are not conventional, my family member was still a human being who hurts just like the rest of us, who is just as capable of ending her life as you and I.

I was not raised in Alaska my entire life. I moved up here when I was eight years old, my indigenous heritage unknown to me, seeing as how I spent most of prior childhood in Beaverton, Oregon, where there is not a very diverse ethnic community and a surprising lack of Native cultural resources. When my mother and I moved to Alaska to be with my grandmother, my mother and grandmother had informed me that I am Sugpiaq and White, and my great grandmother was born in the village of Tatitlek, Alaska, but became an orphan at six years old and was raised in Juneau from then on. My grandmother almost immediately began to insist that I honor my heritage because of this, and I did just that. But as I grew up, I began to notice that the Alaska Native community as a whole isn't only dancing, drumming, singing, beautiful elders reminiscing on the old times, fishing for salmon, and jovial gatherings with tons of food, as it was introduced to me. I began to realize, as I grew into my teen years, that the Alaska Native community also has a dark side.

As I grew up, I began to see that more and more Native people grappled with issues such as sexual abuse and domestic violence (American Indians and Alaska Native women will experience rape and sexual assault at more than double the rate for other minorities (ABA),

alcoholism and drug abuse (American Indians and Alaska Natives will experience rates of alcoholism and substance abuse at over six times the national average (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Indian Health Services)), and mental illness, which all contribute to the issue nearest to my heart: suicide. In recent years, suicide is ranked the leading cause of death for Native people ages 10 to 34 (Suicide Prevention Response Network), and because of the fact that there is a decreasing availability for culturally appropriate mental health services, Native people tend to turn away from these services (Suicide Prevention Response Network), thereby receiving no help. As the aforementioned issues continue to persist, it contributes to increasingly higher rates of suicide that continue to rise (Suicide Prevention Response Network), a heartbreaking and persistent tragedy that doesn't need to happen.

Luckily, there is an increasing awareness of suicide in the Alaska Native community. There is an array of programs offered all around Alaska that help address the issue of suicide and other issues that contribute to the incidence thereof, such as various drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, domestic violence shelters, among others, including one noteworthy program that addresses the issue of suicide directly. This program is called the Denaa Yeets Suicide Intervention Program ("Denaa Yeets", in Athabaskan, means "our breath of life"). The Denaa Yeets Suicide Intervention Program is a program based in Anchorage, Alaska, that offers case management services, support services, referrals to other community resources, as well as counseling for the potential victims and their loved ones (Southcentral Foundation). They often travel to other villages to provide outreach and other services that are offered at their Anchorage headquarters. One thing unique about the program is that they offer seminars and education to the general public (both Native and non-Native) about how to assist someone who is suicidal and what the various warning signs of suicide are, using a two-day workshop approach called Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training, or ASIST (Southcentral Foundation). An interesting fact is that it is run by Alaska Natives and American Indians, which is beneficial because it culturally appropriates the treatment process for the potential victim (Southcentral Foundation).

I hope to one day play a large role in this program's success. Since I am presently a teenager, I feel that involvement is the key to addressing this issue. Being involved and raising awareness can mean anything from assisting someone that is considering suicide, to being upfront and honest on your stance on suicide when it is brought up in conversation, to simply being there for a friend in a time of need. Since not many other teenagers are as open about this issue as I am (which is perfectly understandable), I feel that it is a responsibility of mine to be one of the few to step up and speak out about this. I hope that through raising awareness through involvement, I will inspire other Native teenagers to raise awareness and have the courage to speak out against this issue. That way, the incidence of suicide can be lowered as each generation passes, as each story is told, and as each message is passed through. If everyone is aware of the issue and has the knowledge and strength to help a possible victim, we can all work together to achieve the same health and vitality that our culture had so long ago.

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