



Kalolaine Uhila presenting her research at the Seattle Children's Hospital Research Institute, 2022

ILISAĠVIK STUDENT EARNS COVETED INTERNSHIP AT SEATTLE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

When Kalolaine Uhila found out she was one of 50 chosen from over 900 applicants for the Summer Scholars Program at Seattle Children's Hospital Research Institute she says, "I was shook."

The program took her to Seattle Children's Hospital for a ten-week internship this summer at the Center for Child Health and Development where Uhila helped design an inclusive demographic survey for the Quality of Care Evaluation Program. The survey is part of an attempt to redress inequalities in healthcare for underrepresented and marginal groups.

Uhila, who is Tongan and has lived in Alaska for 11 years, is an Allied Health student at Ilisaġvik College studying Indigenous Human Services. She was the first person from Utqiaġvik accepted into the Summer Scholars Program, and the first from a tribal college. Most of her peers were from four-year undergraduate programs and were mostly preparing to enter medical school this fall.

Uhila met with families coming through the surgical and medical units and asked them about how they would like race to be handled in the hospital's demographic survey. "There is a question as to why certain races are more in touch with their healthcare providers," she explained. "This correlates with underlying health issues. We want to close the gap." The project culminated in a research poster that she presented to everyone at Seattle Children's, including shareholders, content experts, and physicians. The research team included her

Principal Investigator, Dr. Arti Desai, along with Jacqueline Burgara, Dureti Hajikedir, Tommy Nguyen, and Elizabeth Wingfield.

She says the internship taught her “How crucial research is and how the medical field lacks diversity. It also helped me build a better vision of where I want to go with my Allied Health degree and who I want to be in medicine.”

Uhila came to Utqiagvik two summers ago for a job as a summer camp counselor. The following fall she was supposed to go play basketball on scholarship in California but, she says, “Once I met the kids from the [North Slope] villages, I knew I found something I love more than basketball.” She declined the offer in California and enrolled in the Allied Health program at Iñisaġvik. She plans to graduate in the spring of 2023 and hopes to pursue a bachelor’s degree in psychology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. After that she would like to go to medical school and become a psychiatrist.

“Mental health is different with rural kids,” she says. “We need to do research so that we have the data to push for better resources. We shouldn’t have less just because we’re remote.”

In addition to being a full-time student, Uhila works as the Administrative Assistant to Student Services at Iñisaġvik, and she is the female Resident Advisor. She says she encourages students to talk to their advisors about internship opportunities. Her professors David Bennett and Linda Nicholas-Figueroa helped her find the opportunity in Seattle. “I wasn’t even sure I would be qualified, but the program was trying to bring in more diversity and I brought a unique perspective.” Now she says Dr. Desai wants to continue to bring in more rural Alaska students to provide further insight into accommodating rural patients.

Emily Gueco, Associate Dean of Students, helps coordinate student internships. She says, “If there’s something a student wants to do, we will definitely try to make that happen.” Many of the student internship placements are internal at the college, but Gueco says she has placed students at Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, Alaska Growth Capital, and the North Slope Borough School District. “It’s a great chance for students to get real-world experience and get paid.”

Uhila emphasizes the access available to Iñisaġvik students. “As a tribal college, we have as good – or even better – opportunities. You can go places from here.”