My personal and professional dream is to become a public health professional who focuses on youth health education in rural California. As a child, teenager, and young adult, I felt very lost as I tried to navigate the labyrinth of health information that circulated on the Internet, especially on social media. I was not surrounded by adults who modeled healthy behaviors and so I mimicked similar practices. Outside of my home, the health education classes taught in school were confusing and riddled with covert and overt messages of fear and shame. These teaching trends are omnipresent, and this is the reason that I want to become a public health professional. As a public health education advocate, I want to shift the health education framework so that health literacy is at the center of every curriculum. Skills-based health education is a proven way to promote individual health and prevent disease. Through skills-based health education, accessing reliable health information is practiced in the classroom using relevant, comprehensive, and inclusive teaching modules. This provides effective tools to youth so that they have the opportunity to make better, and more informed health decisions. I hope to improve youth health literacy so that future generations use skills-based knowledge to promote the health of themselves, their loved ones, and their community.

When I graduated from the University of California, Davis in June of 2019, I was eager to gain experience in a medical clinic to familiarize myself with patient care. I received a job as a medical assistant in an orthopedic clinic in Oakland, California. After working in the field of palliative care for a year, I found that my interests were drawing me toward a degree in preventative health education. The clinic’s Nurse Practitioner encouraged me to look into public health programs because she saw this as an avenue that would allow me to work with youth as a health professional.

In February of 2020, the pandemic hit, and the orthopedic clinic was severely impacted by the restrictions. This pushed me to look for job opportunities related to public health education. In August of 2020, I moved to rural Northern California, and began working as a Nutrition Educator with CalFresh Healthy Living, University of California Cooperative Extension in Trinity County. I moved my life to Weaverville, California, a small, very remote, town in the heart of the beautiful Klamath Mountain range. My job was to teach nutrition to and to promote physical activity among students in the local schools, to train instructors how to teach the curriculum on their own time, and to provide community education through workshops and community events. My favorite aspect of the position was travelling to schools all throughout Trinity County to directly teach the CalFresh nutrition education curriculum. I taught classes to preschoolers in Lewiston, to a mixed-age group of 1st-8th graders at the one-room schoolhouse in Trinity Center, to the athletes on the Trinity High School track and field team, to the after-school garden program at Douglas City School, and to the 1st, 3-4th, and 5th graders at Burnt Ranch School. Some of my most memorable experiences included organizing and leading a Nutrition Olympics event at Burnt Ranch School that reinforced healthy eating habits and physical activity through games and trivia, and coordinating with the Trinity County Public Health Department and the Trinity Nursery to build school gardens in Douglas City and Trinity Center.

In my free time, I volunteered with the Trinity County Food Bank to help distribute USDA food boxes on the weekends, and I joined the Partnership in Action for Trinity Health (PATH) as a volunteer. As a PATH member, I worked closely with other community-based health organizations to create the first virtual Trinity County health fair that was broadcasted and recorded on the Human Response Network’s Facebook page. As I became more integrated into the community, I became more aware of the clear deficit of health professionals in rural California. According to Dr. Michael Novak, a primary care physician who works for the Redding Rancheria Trinity Health Center, Trinity County is considered “frontier community” in because of the lack of providers, the remoteness of the area, and the distance from a proper hospital/urgent care facility. Hearing this encouraged me to expand my knowledge about health education so that I could be a reliable resource to anyone who might ask me about various health topics. On May 12, 2021, I completed the online Sexual Health Educator training sponsored by the California Department of Public Health, Sexually Transmitted Disease Control Branch so that I had baseline knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases, health policies in California related to sexual education in schools, and ways to talk about comprehensive sexual health to youth. On May 23, 2021, I received my Wilderness First Aid and CPR certification through the Sierra Rescue International. This 16 hour course was led by Dr. Novak, who is an avid trail-runner in the Trinity Alps Wilderness, which is a popular backcountry recreational destination near Weaverville. As a hiker and backpacker myself, I chose to enroll in this course so that I had the skills-based knowledge to help myself, my loved ones, or anyone who I might come across during my trip that needed help. Following this certification, I took a part-time job as a youth trip leader with Ascend Wilderness Experience, a non-profit outdoor education program in Weaverville. I co-led youth day-hiking trips throughout the Trinity Alps Wilderness and ensured that all participants were kept safe, educated on how to respond to a dangerous situation, and made aware of their surroundings and available resources.

In April of 2021, I was invited by Ann Hill, the Tobacco-Use Prevention Education Program Director, to participate in the California Health Education Framework course that was being facilitated by the Trinity County Department of Education. Each month, a group of local teachers and health professionals in Trinity County would meet to discuss a particular section from the framework. The four sections included: Introduction to the CA Health Education Framework; Nutrition, Physical Activity, Mental, Emotional, and Social Health; Growth, Development, Sexual Health, Injury Prevention, and Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs; and Personal and Community Health. This course was so fascinating to me that I decided to apply to graduate school in the hopes of getting a Master’s in Public Health. This seemed like a natural extension of the work I was already loving and doing, and it would help me achieve my future goal to become a public health professional.

When I enrolled in the Community Health Education cohort at San Jose State University, I decided to move home so I could be closer to my family who I hadn’t seen in almost two years due to the varying waves of the pandemic. Since July, I have been working as a Community Health Navigator for Puente de la Costa Sur, a resource center and non-profit in Pescadero, California. With Puente, I have been part of the Community Health Team. Together, we strive to improve access to appropriate services for youth, farmworkers, and seniors living in the remote regions of the South Coast of San Mateo County, specifically the four towns of La Honda, Loma Mar, Pescadero, and San Gregorio. I work with the Health Promoters to conduct weekly outreach to the agricultural farms throughout the South Coast, where we talk with farmworkers and refer them to appropriate resources related to health, finances, and livelihood. I have coordinated dental clinics for local youth, arranged health appointments for farmworkers, and organized health educational classes and workshops tailored to the community. Together, our team works daily to promote individual and community health to create a sustainable and self-reliant South Coast. Recently, the community health team has been facilitating free COVID-19 and influenza vaccine clinics, assisting with monthly food and resource distributions for locals, and setting up health clinics related to chronic disease management, dental care, and communicable disease prevention. My manager and I have developed and implemented programs for locals, such as the 62+ Connection and Wellbeing Program which aims to reduce sentiments of isolation and loneliness for senior South Coast residents through activities and opportunities for socialization, while still adhering to the COVID-19 protocols.

My professional and educational commitments have shown me that I am adaptable and faithful to public health. My dream is to become a public health professional who works to improve youth health education. I hope to work in a local health department that focuses on school-based health and health literacy in rural areas throughout California. I have taken the appropriate steps educationally and professionally to increase my competency in public health topics by enrolling in a graduate program and working for organizations that reflect my values and interests. Additionally, I hope to attain a Certified Health Education Specialist license so that I may further my knowledge about trust-worthy health education and how to promote healthy decisions and behaviors amongst youth. However, in order to achieve these goals, I need financial support. As an undergraduate who could not afford to pay for my education, I relied on loans and scholarships. I have accumulated over $80,000 in student loan debt, which I am currently paying off each month. I have worked hard to save up money to pay off my undergraduate debt while simultaneously paying for my graduate school program. I believe that this scholarship would lessen my financial stress considerably. I am applying for the Dr. Mary K. Beyrer Scholarship because my aspirations and actions align harmoniously with the principles that Dr. Beyrer exemplified. I am grateful for the opportunity to apply for such a generous scholarship, and I would be an honored recipient.