Dear Foundation for the Advancement of Health Education Board,

While researching new opportunities for funding my Doctorate in Public Health (DrPH) at University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth), I was excited to discover the Dr. Delbert Oberteuffer Scholarship. I believe I am most qualified to receive your award because I have 15 years of outstanding academic and professional achievement in the fields of applied anthropology and public health. By achieving this degree, I dream of new leadership horizons and greater capacity to tackle structural inequality. These aspirations are already manifesting in just my second year. But because I come from a working-class family and have spent my career in public service, I have depended on scholarships to help me achieve these goals. Let me tell you what I’ve already accomplished through the generosity of other organizations like your own, and why I’m the best candidate for your award as well.

I began my career in health equity and social justice by earning a bachelor’s degree on a university-funded full ride scholarship in Cultural Anthropology with a focus on Structural Racism in 2010. In my senior year, I was granted the Presidential Scholar Award, the school’s highest academic achievement, for mastery in all four subfields of Anthropology. I was also awarded the William Cremin Award for Archaeology in recognition for my excellent performance in Archaeology. These awards helped pay for my archaeological field school. I applied what I learned in field school during my first job where I conducted field archaeology and public education on the health, inequality, and class of Mississippian people to people of all ages, but especially excited youth who visited our sites.

After working in archaeology for a few years, I decided to refocus on population health among living people. To this end, I obtained a Master of Public Health (MPH) from Saint Louis University (SLU) in 2014 on a university-sponsored, full-ride graduate research assistantship, concentrating on Health Education and Behavioral Science. I was granted this competitive funding for both years of my program for my excellent grades, passion for social justice, and demonstrated student leadership. For example, I hosted several guest presentations for student audiences focused on economic justice which engaged my classmates in new areas of justice work. I also assisted with the visioning of the then newly-formed College for Public Health and Social Justice.

With health equity as my north star at SLU, I met Dr. Grant Farmer, an out, gay epidemiologist focusing on LGBTQ smoking trends. Through our work, Dr. Farmer not only mentored me in health equity epidemiology, he also modeled for me how to be a queer leader in public health. Through this experience I learned that I wanted to focus on the health of LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults so I could respond to the structural reasons why my community has such poor outcomes. But just as I spread my wings in the field of public health, Dr. Farmer tragically took his own life. Crushed by this news, I vowed to carry his work on. Our friendship is a major motivation for my dedication to changing systems to improve LGBTQIA+ population health.

Once graduating from SLU, I took every opportunity to lead in fighting for social justice and health equity. I worked on dozens of political and issues-based campaigns and with hundreds of activists and organizers. In several cases, I was awarded grant funding to pay for these community-based initiatives. For example, in 2015, I co-founded a nonprofit focused on worker-education for people of color and people with disabilities, both of whom are too commonly left out of skilled-trades training and unionism. Co-directing this nonprofit, I personally raised $12,500 used the money to coordinate a program focused on expanding opportunities for young women of color to get union construction jobs. The program resulted in over 700 doors knocked and referred over a dozen women to training opportunities. During this time, I also was awarded $3,000 from the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission to promote the history and struggle of striking workers in Ferguson, Missouri using my photo-journalism as a mechanism.

Other initiatives I spearheaded were done on a volunteer basis, applying the community-change methods I learned during my MPH. For example, in 2019, I founded Rainbow Workers’ Alliance, a community organization focused on raising wages, improving workplace protections, and expanding healthcare coverage for queer and trans people in St. Louis. I leveraged my behavioral science and leadership skills to facilitate trans people of color, disabled queers, and other LGBTQIA+ young adults to strategically plan and implement their own strategies for economic justice and worker protection. Through this effort, we placed 11 LGBTQIA+ young adults in union-protected jobs. During this time, I also worked at the City of St Louis Department of Health, where I developed and implemented an HIV prevention program for LGBTQIA+ youth ages 12-24 at risk for homelessness.

Throughout my career I’ve worked in academic settings, public health consulting firms, and in city government. Working in public health for seven years led me to start my DrPH at UTHealth. This program has provided me with the opportunity to analyze the conditions which produce inequality and develop strategies for how to address them. For example, I have focused all of my class projects on smoking prevention among LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults, a key health concern for this population. This is setting up my future career to make a huge difference in the health and quality of life for LGBTQIA+ youth.

Currently, as Dr. J. Michael Wilkerson’s graduate research assistant, teacher’s assistant, and mentee, I am learning not only the technical skills to research, teach on, and apply health education, but I am also learning what it looks like to be a humble, passionate, and dedicated leader in health equity. For example, I was selected to attend the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health 2021 Student Leadership Institute cohort, in recognition of my demonstrated leadership and outstanding commitment to diversity and inclusion. I was also elected as the LGBTQIA+ Chair of the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Advocacy Committee at UTHealth this year, which allows me to represent the interest of hundreds of LGBTQIA+ young adult students at UTHealth. Additionally, I was awarded the Aurelia Murphy Killian Endowment in Public Health in 2020, as well as the Toshi Nikaido Service Award and University of Texas Positive Impact Scholarship in 2021.

Courses remain expensive, though, and my photography income has dried up because of the COVID-19 pandemic. That leaves me with budget shortfalls every semester. By awarding me the Dr. Delbert Oberteuffer Scholarship, your organization will fund the tuition for a diligent, goal-oriented professional, with a passion for justice and documented track-record of success. What I will gain from your award will cause a ripple effect in my career and community, paying forward your investment in me. Thank you for the consideration.

Sincerely,

Niles Zoschke, MPH