Introducing Rafael McLeod

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Rafael McLeod

My name is Rafael McLeod. I was born in Fort Worth, Texas. I was adopted at a very young age by my parents, John and Cindy McLeod, and was moved to Las Vegas, New Mexico, where I spent 17 years of my life.

I grew up in a stable environment, on a 43-acre farm, helping my parents raise animals and grow produce. As a young kid in the country, I had a lot of space and a lot of opportunity to explore and learn fundamental outdoor skills.

As a teenager, I not only watched my dad participate with our local volunteer fire department, but I also went along with him on a couple of mop up runs. I saw him helping people, and that's something I love. So, it didn't take long for me to gain interest in fire. This interest in fire, along with a strong desire to experience exciting new things, has motivated me throughout my life.

However, while I consider myself highly motivated, I often struggle in life pushing my comfort zone. Therefore, in an attempt to overcome this struggle, I decided to try to attend the Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center Boarding School in Estes Park, Colorado. This, by far, was one of the hardest and best decisions I have had to make. The decision meant that, at age 17, I would have to move out of my home in Las Vegas and spend two-and-a-half years at this school.

Eagle Rock School is unique because it is one-hundred percent funded by Honda Corporations. Every student at Eagle Rock is on a $45,000/year scholarship, and earning admission into the school is a challenging process. I began the process by sending a written letter stating why I wanted to be a part of the Eagle Rock community. After the letter was accepted, I participated in a 30-minute phone interview to share a little more about myself and to further describe my characteristics, personality, and life goals. After the phone interview, the counselor told me that the school would like to fly me up to Estes Park, along with a few other applicants, to see how we each might fit within the tight-knit Eagle Rock community, which consists of about 70 students. So, I traveled and stayed there for four days, getting to know the students, as well as undergoing a student body evaluation. Again, they wanted to get a sense of how well I might fit into the new community.

After those four days, I went back home and waited for the acceptance letter. When it came, I sat in the car for about an hour considering how much this was going to change my life. I was right to be nervous. During my first couple of trimesters (each school year consisted of three trimesters), I struggled a lot. I knew, in the back of my head, that pushing my comfort zone would be difficult, at first, but that eventually things would get better. I simply needed to stay focused and not give up. And as the trimesters passed, a huge opportunity came along in the form of the Rocky Mountain National Park internship, a pilot program that began with my school. The program offers select Eagle Rock students a rare opportunity to temporarily work at Rocky Mountain National Park as an intern in a field of interest. Furthermore, if all goes well, these select few internships can lead to a career at the park.

I applied, and after a lot of hard work demonstrating that I was a positive community member, I earned an internship with the Rocky Mountain National Park Trails Crew. I tried to earn an internship in fire, but at the time, the position and the funding did not exist for my exact field of interest. Nevertheless, I had a lot of fun and learned a lot of new skills working with the trails crew.

This year, I had an opportunity to detail with the Alpine Interagency Hotshot Crew, and I was hesitant because I already had earned a seasonal position with the trails crew. But looking at the big picture, I realized that pursuing a detail opportunity with Alpine meant I could further push myself out of my comfort zone and pursue my field of interest in fire. Since I joined the crew in May, I already have been to projects or fires in Texas, Arizona, and Colorado, and I have seen more fire behavior in a month than many first-year firefighters see in an entire season. I love it!

My first impression of working with the Alpine IHC is that the crew is tight knit, team oriented, proud, hard working, organized, highly motivated, and fun to be around. And the work is rewarding and exciting...just what I was looking for. I already am learning basic and advanced firefighting knowledge and skills, and I am realizing the benefits of maintaining high work

standards!