

Best Friends

800 Miles from Home Again

By Mark Billings

For 23-year-old Katelyn Nguyen, home has been an elusive place – a destination she has forged paths toward only to find new front doors, new people, new everything.

A native of Worcester, Massachusetts outside of Boston, Nguyen moved around the central part of the state up until her freshman year in high school when her family relocated to Iowa. Right before her senior year, the family left the Hawkeye State and moved back east to Northern Connecticut. She lived there for a year before enrolling in Brigham Young University (BYU) Idaho and graduating this past April with a degree in Public Health, Health Education and Promotion.

Although her commencement ceremony was cancelled due to COVID, Nguyen had hammered out a bright path to one door – and boldly opened it to become the first person in her family to graduate from college.

“I pretty much grew up low-income but didn’t realize at the time that not everyone received a free and reduced lunch,” said Nguyen, the oldest of three siblings. “My mom stayed at home with us kids and my dad worked a lot of different jobs as an immigrant and learning his way.”

A nature lover and avid hiker, the change of scenery from congested cities and suburbs to the wide-open spaces of the West suited Nguyen well. It was at BYU she volunteered for a mentoring program, learned of the AmeriCorps/Volunteers In Service To America or VISTA program and ultimately took a position with the Best Friends Mentoring Program (BFMP) starting in December 2020.

Funded by the Corporation for National and Community Services, a federal agency, AmeriCorps/VISTA is a national service program designed to end poverty by improving the capacity of nonprofit organizations and public agencies. An estimated 75,000 Americans each year like Nguyen work with local organizations such as BFMP in addressing a variety of community needs.

Nguyen and Paige Langhoff, a fall 2020 Dickinson State University graduate who is also an AmeriCorps/VISTA member, will serve for one year to help BFMP increase its capacity in serving at-risk youth. The two positions are funded through a partnership with the Souris Basin Planning Council in Minot and BFMP.

Nguyen single-handedly drove a U-Haul while pulling a trailer and settled into her apartment only one day before showing up for work at BFMP. As a program coordinator, she said she will build on skills she learned as a former mentee in the Big Brothers Big Sisters Program of Central Massachusetts as well as from when she served as a mentor at BYU’s Heber J. Grant Mentoring Program. There, she mentored dozens of other BYU freshman and international students and also oversaw other student mentors as her tenure spanned nearly three years in the program.

“It’s hard to say how many different students I worked with there,” Nguyen recalled. “I was one of the longest mentors in the program.”

Nguyen will work with BFMP staff and Langhoff in supporting the organization’s work in Stark County and across southwest North Dakota.

“Some of my goals are to advance professionally while getting to know and fully immerse myself in the community,” she said. “I see a lot of potential good in our local youth and truly believe they are our future.”

To contact Nguyen, email katelyn@bestfriendsnd.org. For more information about Best Friends, including ways to support Giving Hearts Day on Feb. 11, 2021, visit www.bestfriendsnd.org.