

To the Justin Benjamin Foundation,

Thank you for your support in furthering my education. At a time when funding opportunities for conservation work are few and dwindling, it is difficult to fully express my gratitude for your foundation's investment in my work on Catalina.

To be concise about myself, I am a rising senior from a farming town in New Mexico, concluding a BS in Environmental Studies with a minor in French. As with any good passion, I fall more in love with the environmental sciences with each academic year, but even more over each summer. The first way that many people learn empathy and the value of effort over time is through the natural world. Watching the ways a plant bends to grow or how animals mutter to their young still in the womb, we learn the brute and softness of living. An occupational hazard I value in conservationists, something I also valued in my grandmother (once a conservationist herself), is their dedication to physically laboring for something. Like parental dedication or the meditation of the urban gardener, many people find their vise in physical care. This is a privilege that requires purpose and planning. Conservation, at any scale, is my vise, and it's emboldening to know that my ecological research minutely dictates the labor of conservation. Through this native plant experience with the Catalina Island Conservancy, I've been able to enact something meaningful to me. I was able to do the work that research institutions fight for, and to feel a generational connection to my grandmother.

Many of my favorite anecdotes from the island revolve around birds, something my grandmother knew a lot about. I can't begin to draw all the connections between her and my work because she's in everything I've done. I think it's similar for my grandfather, who, in his 70s, still hikes up New Mexico's Sandia Mountain to do trail maintenance, a mountain they often scaled together. The best bird anecdote I can share speaks to resilience. My first week in Middle Ranch, a Western Flycatcher made her nest on the beam above our living room door and produced three tiny, perfectly white eggs. There was soon an unspoken rule not to slam the very easily slam-able door. We'd often wish her luck while rushing out to a 7 am department meeting or coo our praises to her as we walked in from work. In my fifth week, the nest was on the ground and the eggs gone (likely the work of a raven). She soon started anew in a less obvious tree in the back field. I won't anthropomorphize the Western Flycatcher, but I can surely internalize pieces of her push to bear on.

Structurally, my internship will open the door for me to opportunities in plant sciences. What's more, my exposure to native plant horticulture, micropropagation, and native plant surveys was made more valuable through the gravity of the work's importance. It's funny that scrambling over rocks in search of plants can have emotional gravity. It's childlike.

Looking to the future, there is no conservation without legislation. This fall, I will be interning for the California Coastkeeper Alliance and continuing to learn about the current state of environmental protections. I also plan to continue my study of medicinal herbology and native plant horticulture. It will be hard to choose a PhD program considering how many scattered passions the Wrigley Institute has given me. I'm deeply thankful for your generosity and will use the experience to inform my career choices.

With gratitude,  
Natalie McClure