

2021 Dominick D. Critelli, Jr. Scholarship Application:

“What Being a Member of a Union Family Means to Me”

By Jenna Benenson

I have good memories going to the dentist from a young age. Dr. Lim in Oakland and Dr. Cheng in Walnut Creek have both broken the stigma that dentists are evil beings who want to violently steal your teeth and turn them into gold. Even my orthodontist experience with Dr. Wafelbakker was fun. But I do not think either experience has been “fun” for my parents. Finances for cavities and braces are not easy, but I am fortunate to have parents who work hard at their jobs and are able to provide for me. When I broke my nose, had a seed stuck in my esophagus, sprained my wrist, sprained my toe, and sprained my knee, I was able to be taken care of by medical professionals. I never had to worry about getting the right care or how much it would cost. And my mom being part of a union has helped immensely. Her role in a union and as a mother have allowed me not to have to worry about serious things when I was younger. She has taught me the value of speaking up and standing together with those who have the same values as I do. She taught me how to deal with money when I needed to learn. But most of all, she taught me humankindness, which is what I believe unions symbolize. Treating employees, and people in general, with respect and care is something that I fight for on a daily basis. My dream is to be a fifth grade teacher that inspires kids of all kinds to value each other and take into account how their actions affect others. I want to be that influence for kids to follow their passions and learn to help one another, and that started with my mom. Whenever she talked about her union at the dinner table, I perked up. She spoke of believing in equal and fair treatment of all, and that influenced me in the best way possible. With her desire to protest and help start the Contra Costa

Women's March group, all that has increased tenfold. All this talk of fairness and equity made me think. How do my actions influence others? How can I be a good example of someone who cares? My curiosity led me to working with elementary school kids in theater and taught me the value of leading by example. Even with the more difficult kids, I still treated them with the respect and kindness that I would give to the well-behaved kids. It was important to me that all of the children felt appreciated and that they were able to voice their issues without getting in trouble. It was difficult for me to watch kids get harsh discipline without hearing their side of the story, so I tried my best to listen and think through the situation before acting on it. Those core values that my mom talked about with her union changed me for the better. I am now a more empathetic person who values the individual's experience and wants to make people feel better about themselves. I want to work with kids to make sure that our future is filled with kindness, not out of necessity, but of reason and truth. And I believe that all started with the dinner table conversation about my mom's union.