

Meher Khan

School: Sunset High School, Grade 12

State: Oregon

If you had asked me what I was the most afraid of at that moment, I would have said hot air balloons. But for the next ten years, I would be seeing them nearly every month.

Since the second grade, I have spent so many hours in my optometrist's office that the staff recognizes me as soon as I come inside. Following a failing score in the visual acuity test during a free vision screening in elementary school, I was prescribed glasses, then Ortho-K lenses to slow the deterioration of my vision, and then soft contact lenses. I now know that the hot air balloon is not distracting me from something that will touch my eye, but that the machine is an autorefractor. This constant exposure to the field has led me to want to become a pediatric optometrist with an emphasis in Public Health.

As an undergraduate student, I want to pursue the major "Biochemistry and Molecular Biology". During IB Biology HL, I became fascinated by the genetic diseases we studied, and I wondered how genetics impacts vision. Furthermore, systemic disease such as diabetes often manifests first in the eye, so optometric care is crucial for detecting illnesses before they progress.

After my undergraduate education, I aim to attend optometry school and pursue a specialization in pediatrics. My long-term goal is to help increase eyecare access to elementary-age children. Throughout the United States, there is a lack of consistency regarding the vision screenings of children. I was privileged to be attending a public elementary school in Oregon where a visual acuity screening is required before third grade. However, many other states have difficulty implementing this requirement, and there are six states that do not require any screenings at all. Furthermore, vision screenings are mostly only present in the United States—many other countries do not have the resources to actualize this form of medical care.

There is a strong correlation between vision and academic performance, so it is necessary for students to receive free in-school screenings so that their vision problems are identified and corrected. Regardless of if a state requires visual screenings, some children may not have the resources for vision correction. I hope to open a clinic or work in a mobile unit that treats children regardless of their financial status. I would also like to volunteer in other countries to provide optometric care at no cost.

Optometry school does have a significant price, so receiving this Jiffy Lube scholarship will help lessen my undergraduate debt so that I am able to pursue graduate education. With this training, in approximately nine years, I hope to help all children be able to see hot air balloons not only in a machine, but also in the sky.