
Community Letters

by Michelle Torgerson, '05

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When I received my acceptance to National Urban Fellows, it was one of the happiest and saddest day of my life. I had to leave behind the nonprofit "baby" I'd helped to create in a modest office above a St. Paul liquor store – a place so unglamorous, but so meaningful. As the first in my family to graduate from college, I had returned home determined to remove barriers for others like me, building an organization that provided college access in communities resettling Hmong and Somali refugees.

I Growing up without financial security, I knew that if I was going to break that cycle in my family, I needed to use what I had. What I didn't know then was how transformative my NUF experience would be – and how much of that transformation would come through a partnership like yours.

My NUF Class of 2005 was legendary for our unity – 31 in, 31 out. You were only as strong as the weakest link of the group, and we were all counting on each other to lead and pick each other up.

My mentorship placement at Los Angeles World Airports transformed

my understanding of organizational leadership. I was paired with an absolutely fabulous Mentor, Barbara Yamamoto, who headed Community Relations. Coming from a grassroots nonprofit where we celebrated every \$15 check, I was suddenly exposed to a large bureaucracy with unionized work, collective bargaining, and policy development.

What I learned through that mentorship was invaluable: how organizations with resources invest in their people, how to navigate complex systems, and how to implement values-driven leadership in institutional settings.

Today, as President and CEO of Raising a Reader, I lead with principles I learned through NUF: building teams united by common purpose, valuing talent, and an unwavering commitment to equity. For me, it's equity over equality – always. These aren't just concepts I studied; they're practices I witnessed through your kind of mentorship.



Class of 2005

In today's challenging climate, the work you do as Mentors and partners is more critical than ever. The leadership skills and perspectives NUF Fellows gain through your guidance prepare them to navigate the complexities of our time with both competence and conviction.

When people ask why they should support NUF, I tell them: NUF generates some of the top and most talented leaders in this country, full stop. What I don't always have time to explain is how much of that talent development happens through mentorship and partnership relationships like the ones you provide.

Our country needs fresh leaders right now – leaders who understand systems, who can build bridges across differences, and who remain committed to equity even when it's difficult. Your partnership shapes those leaders. Your support creates the conditions for their success.

Thank you for your commitment to developing the leaders our communities need. What you do matters for all the people whose lives will be touched by their leadership in their communities for years to come.

