

AURORA



**In a tough year, she
helps others find UAF:
Ray Alda '21**

By Sam Bishop

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Ray Alda tries out some commencement ceremony regalia in March 2021. UAF photos by JR Ancheta unless otherwise noted.

People don't ask about the ornate script tattooed on Rachel "Ray" Alda's lower left arm.

The script, though short, tells much of her story and that of her family.

"I think people are afraid to ask, 'Oh what is that?' because, at first glance, it's like a barbed wire or something," Alda said.

It's not barbed wire but something far more painful.

Ray Alda shows the tattoo on her left forearm.



“This is my dad’s signature actually,” she said. “I got it right after he passed.”

Alda, who graduated in May 2021, lost her father a year earlier. His signature reminds Alda of the remarkable man who started her own remarkable journey.

Philippine roots

Alda first met her father, Ruel, in the late 1990s, but she doesn’t remember the moment. Family lore has recorded it vividly.

Her mother, Remy, was living in Anchorage after moving from the couple’s home country of the Philippines. She was pregnant, and then Ray was born two months premature.

After waiting a few months, Remy and the baby flew to visit her husband in the Philippines.

“That’s when my dad first met me,” Alda said.

As they arrived, Ray was riding in a baby carrier, a ubiquitous item in the United States. Not so much in the Philippines.

“Those baby carriers weren’t a big thing there,” Alda said
“When she handed him the baby carrier, he thought it was just a basket. ... He didn’t know there was a child in there! She [Remy] was like, that’s your child!”

After that rough start, the whole family reunited in Anchorage when Alda’s father moved there in 2001.



Remy and Ruel Alda hold their daughter Ray in 2004. Photo courtesy of Ray Alda.

Alda's mother worked for McDonald's as a manager. Her father also found work at McDonald's, as well as with Walmart. For both companies, he worked as a mechanic.

It was his field — sort of.

Ruel Alda had worked as a mechanical engineer in the Philippines.

“He got his degree, he got his master’s, he worked at an oil plant in the Philippines. He was very valued in his job,” Alda said.

In the U.S., though, the rules were different.

“They don’t actually recognize Filipino degrees here,” she said. “Even though you’ve worked in the field, you have so much experience, you have the degree to show for it — because it’s not from an American institution, it’s not something that they are recognizing as valid.”

Her father still could have gone to work on the North Slope, but he chose instead to stay in Anchorage with his family.

“Which I appreciate so much,” Alda said.

A unique upbringing

Growing up in Anchorage, Alda was active and academically successful. She played tennis with the West Anchorage High School team while it took the state championship several years in a row. She volunteered for both the Lions Club and the Red Cross from junior high through her graduation.

Another family event, though, had an unusual consequence. In 2007, her grandparents on her father's side came to live with them in Anchorage.

"My dad was working two jobs, and my mom was very busy with her job, so they were like, 'No one is raising her kid,'" Alda said with a laugh.

In Anchorage, her grandfather did some outside work cooking and catering, but her grandmother worked in the home exclusively.

"My grandma was like the housekeeper, the person who was there — cooked, cleaned, she did laundry, she did all that," Alda said.

She also had an informal rule.

“My grandma was kind of like joking around and would say ‘I’ll slap you if you talk to me in English,’” Alda said.

So Alda learned to speak Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines, fluently. As a first-generation Filipino American, she has found that to be unusual.



Ruel Alda holds his daughter, Ray, while Remi Alda holds their niece, Marian, during a visit to Lobo, in the Philippines. Photo courtesy of Ray Alda.

“It’s very impressive to a lot of the community members,” she said. “They’re like, ‘Oh, you speak Tagalog, are you from the Philippines? I’m like ‘No.’ ‘So you just learned it?’ ‘Yep, I just learned it.’”

Her ability draws a little teasing, though.

“Granted they’re like ‘Hah, you have an accent ... you just sound so posh and American,’” Alda said. “Because I am! I don’t know what accent I’m supposed to have.”

Alda has found it hard to keep her language skills sharp while attending college, though. She doesn’t find many other Filipinos who speak Tagalog in Fairbanks.

The language is very different from English, she said.

“There are a lot of syllables, and if you miss a syllable it changes the meaning. And if you change which syllable you stress, it changes the meaning,” she said. “So if you’re trying to say ‘friend’ but you stress the wrong syllable, you say ‘lover.’ Then you’re like, ‘No, no, that’s not what I meant.’”

Success at UAF

When she came to UAF, Alda entered the pre-nursing certificate program. An anatomy and physiology class with Sandy Lewis, a former adjunct faculty member in the Department of Biology and Wildlife, changed that plan.

Alda wrote Lewis as an incoming first-year student, asking to take the 200-level class.

“I emailed her in the summer and was like ‘Hey, I took anatomy and physiology in high school. I did very well. I’m an honors student ... please let me in your class.’”

Lewis did, and the lab work changed Alda’s plan.

“I love being in labs,” she said. “I can look under the microscope and basically diagnose patients. That’s pretty sweet.”

She switched to seek a four-year biology degree with an emphasis on biomedical science.

The anatomy class was hard, though.

“Throughout high school, I was in IB [International Baccalaureate] classes. I was in AP [Advanced Placement] classes. A lot of the things I did were purely memorization,” she said. “It was her class that really taught me to not learn things through memorization but to learn through concepts.”

“I can look under the microscope and basically diagnose patients. That’s pretty sweet.”

Alda said she’s now interested in becoming certified to work as medical laboratory scientist. She has no plans to jump into graduate studies. She said she needs to take a little time to recover from the mental and emotional strain of the past year.

In the meantime, she’s working as an assistant admissions counselor at UAF.

She first joined the Admissions Office in 2018 as a student ambassador.



Ray Alda, top photo center, joins other student ambassadors for a spring stroll across campus in March 2019. At bottom left, she pauses before her first biology class. At bottom right, during new student orientation in 2019, Alda runs under the giant inflatable Nanook used to open hockey games.

“It has opened so many doors. I’ve met so many cool people through it,” she said. Students across campus greet

her regularly, remembering her sometimes as their first contact at UAF.

Anna Gagne-Hawes '09, UAF's director of admissions, said Alda has a rare gift for the work.

Alda can be on the phone charging up an incoming first-year student one minute and the next be comforting a single parent in tears wondering how to make college work, Gagne-Hawes said.

"She's very intuitive about where people are at," Gagne-Hawes said. "She's able to switch gears very quickly."

"It's easy to be disconnected from what an emotional thing it is for many people to apply for college," Gagne-Hawes said. "There's just a lot of emotions involved in the process, both positive and intimidating."

Alda's background from a multigenerational immigrant family may help her navigate those different emotions, Gagne-Hawes said.

"A real value you get out of that is you physically live with people who are in different places in their lives," she said.

“You learn to pivot and adjust.”

The past year challenged Alda like no other.

“I saw her tested hard, and she proved how strong and resilient she is,” Gagne-Hawes said.

Alda, who graduated with cum laude honors, was selected as the student speaker for the 2021 commencement ceremony. She also received the 2021 Marion Frances Boswell Award, given to an outstanding bachelor’s degree candidate.



*UAF Chancellor Dan White presents Ray Alda with the Marion Frances Boswell Award, given annually to an outstanding graduating senior, in spring 2021. **UA Interim President Pat Pitney '90**, at left, applauds.*

A deliberative signature

Alda said she intentionally placed the tattoo she carries on her arm so it's not the first thing people notice about her. It becomes visible only when she lifts her arm to move her hair or brush away a mosquito.

The distinctive image adorns her left forearm, because that's closest to the hand that held her father's when he died of a stroke.

He was just 49 years old. Alda was with him when it happened. His speech slurred. His motions became awkward.

From her biomedical training, she knew what was happening. His lifestyle, working two jobs, getting no sleep and the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic overcame him, she said.

He spent a week in the hospital in Anchorage before dying.

“I saw her tested hard, and she proved how strong and resilient she is.”

The next day, Alda made an appointment to get the tattoo.





Clockwise from top left: Ray and her father, Ruel, visit the Alaska State Fair in Palmer in July 2016; Ray takes 2016 senior photos with her father at McHugh Creek in Anchorage; Ruel carries Ray at their home in Anchorage in December 2019; Ray Alda, right, and her father, Ruel, visit Tagaytay, in the Philippines, in 2019. The Taal Volcano is in the background. Photos courtesy of Ray Alda.

“In the Philippines, mechanical engineers, because they have to do blueprints and that kind of stuff, their signatures are very deliberative,” she said.

Her father drew the signature by starting with a horizontal line then writing his name upside and backward across it. It’s more recognizable as lettering if viewed that way.

Alda and her father also worked on a unique signature for her when she was about 8 years old, but she didn’t keep it.

“If you saw my signature, it’s literally just some scribbles,” she said.

So the image on her arm will continue to tell both their stories as she reaches to grasp the next stage of her life.

Ray Alda, left, and Victoria Nelson celebrate outside Wood Center during a late season snow flurry in March 2021.



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