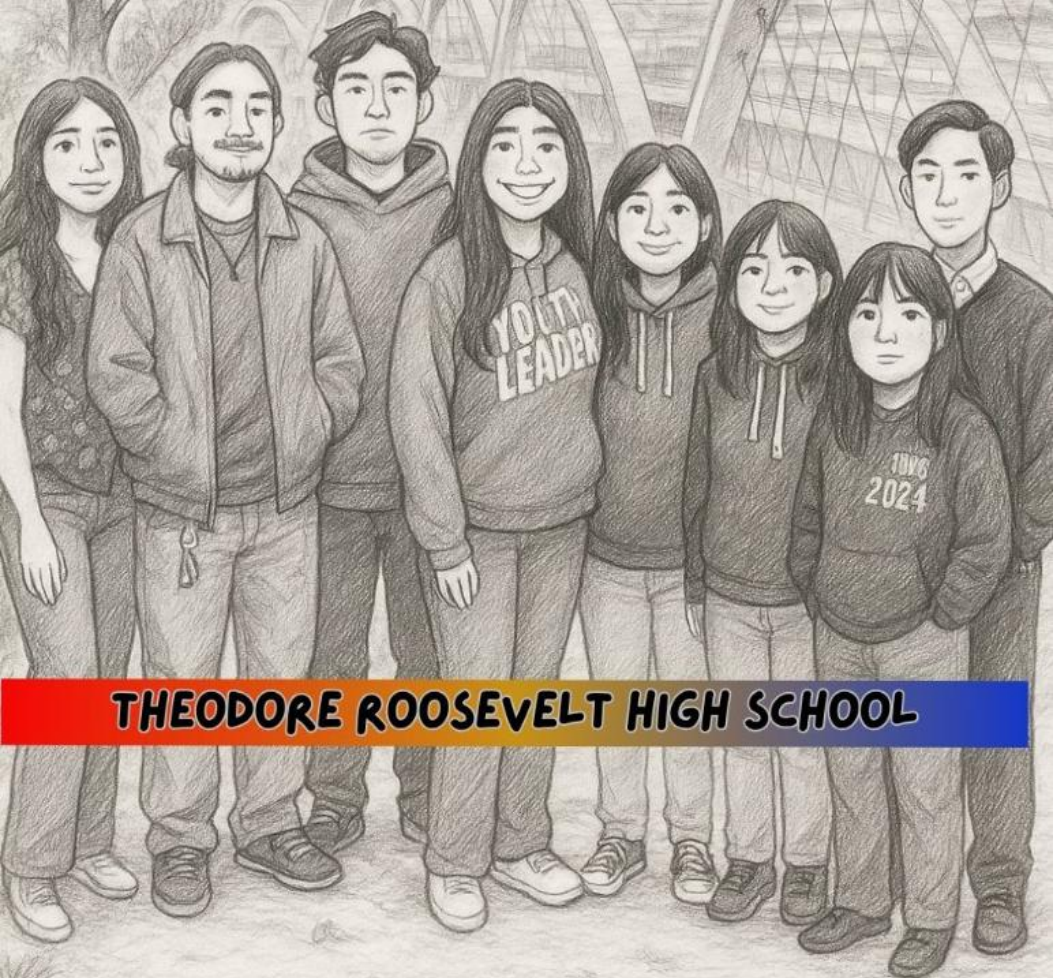


Los Angeles 2025



STORIES OF IDENTITY, LEADERSHIP, AND DREAMS



THEODORE ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL

Salesian Family Youth Center

Salesian Family Youth Center

**Voices from Roosevelt: Stories of
Identity, Leadership, and Dreams**

Los Angeles 2025

Graphic Design:

Luis Emilio Montenegro

Notes From Chicago

Salesian Family Youth Center

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Special Thanks

- **Beyond the Bell**; for their unconditional support and for the love of the young people in our communities. Thank you, Francisca Gamez and Michael Koo,
- **SHOUT Team! Angel Castillo, Angélica Rojas, René Castillo, Kate Alvara.**
- **To all of you who believe in young people!** Without your support the Salesian Family Youth Center will not exist.

Book Introduction

Salesian Family Youth Center



Introducing this powerful compilation, *Roosevelt Notes from Chicago*, is an incredible honor. Each page in this book is a window into the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of young people whose voices deserve to be seen, heard, and celebrated.

This project is more than an academic exercise; it is an act of courage and creativity. Our students have reflected deeply on the world around them and within them, channeling that insight into stories that are raw, authentic, and often profoundly moving. Their words are filled with truth, humor, vulnerability, and hope.

At the Salesian Family Youth Center, we aim to empower young people to become their best selves. When we provide space for their growth and expression, we see something transformative: young leaders stepping into their voice, taking ownership of their story, and imagining a future beyond what they've been told is possible. Watching them grow makes a huge difference in their lives and ours.

Roosevelt Notes from Chicago is a beautiful reminder of why we believe strongly in our youth's potential. These pages

reflect the richness of their minds and the resilience of their spirits. We are so proud of them and grateful to be a part of this journey.

Thank you for reading, for supporting, and for believing in the voices of tomorrow.

JC Montenegro, PhD
Salesian Family Youth Center
Executive Director

Words from our Facilitator!

In December 2024, a group of students from Roosevelt High School and I, Luis Chacón, embarked on an ambitious journey into the world of storytelling. What began as a simple idea has blossomed into this powerful book—a collection of voices, reflections, and dreams from a diverse group of young leaders.

This book is much more than a writing project; it is a reflection of cultural richness, resilience, and youthful determination. Each student brought their unique



perspective to our sessions—some with stories of overcoming personal and systemic challenges, others with dreams of reshaping their communities and futures. We met in borrowed classrooms—sometimes a teacher’s room, a computer lab, or the small space reserved for our SHOUT program at Roosevelt. Our meetings always started in a circle, where we shared highlights of our week, and then, in silence, we wrote.

For many, this was the first time they paused to reflect on their own lives and gave voice to their inner world. Through their writing, they explored themes of identity, family, leadership, fear, and hope. The result is a book that is honest, courageous, and deeply human.

This project, like the one at Bravo Medical Magnet, is rooted in the belief that every young person has a story worth telling. Who would have imagined that at 16 or 17 years old, these students would become published co-authors? Yet here they are—ready to inspire others with their words.

The purpose of this book is simple: to inspire. We hope that readers—especially young people facing similar challenges—will see themselves in these pages, feel understood, and recognize that their voices and stories

matter. May this book be a spark for those still searching for their voice.

I invite you to journey through these stories with an open heart and mind. I am honored to have walked alongside these young authors, and I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed writing it.

—Luis Chacón

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CHAPTER 1: Our story and what defines us

Chicuei - The Roots of My Freedom

I have been a very proud person all my life. I'm proud of my heritage—that of the Purepecha warriors, who never bowed to the Mexica, who fought to their last breath against the Spanish, and who now hold their land and



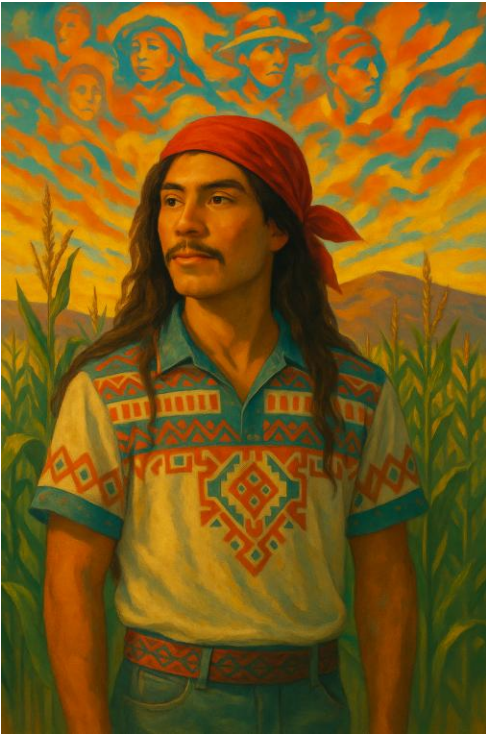
language as pillars of modern identity and diaspora. I come from the Caxcan of Zacatecas. From the curanderas and yerberos—the healing hands that guide us, the land that protects us. The galloping of the hours, the grunt of the men,

the grinding of the metate. All these sounds and skills are of my land, my roots, the soul of my pride. All of this, I carry within me. It is what my family has bestowed upon me.

I feel the blood course through me as fast as the Río Grande—the rushing water, the place my father crossed, and my mother avoided. The dripping, wet, and cold path to a perceived better life.

I am Indigenous. I am autonomous. The feeling of freedom has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. It was told to me in the books I read at home. Zapata and Subcomandante Marcos adorned the walls in modern frescos of paper. The parade of sounds and vibrations grazed my young, childish ears—the sound of our stories, our pain, our pride.

I remember playing in my father's proud, tall milpa. The corn stood like pillars holding up the sky. Every home we had—every rental apartment, every house, every loft, every industrial building we made our own—we always had land. The dirt touched my toes; the sun turned my pale face red like the tomatoes I loved and ate like apples. He would tell me stories of our heritage, our sacrifices, and our tragic past. He spoke of the future—how the people of the past are lessons for us and for what's ahead. How the Zapatistas



were an example of self-sufficiency, independence, and autonomy as the way to happiness. He was right, though I wouldn't understand that for years.

If my father was the farming, manufacturing, revolutionary educator, my mother was the nourishing caregiver and teacher. She was

the Comandante Ramona to his stern Marcos. She was the light, the flower, the xochitl. She taught me how to care, how to listen, and how to tend to others. She homeschooled me while my father worked. She passed down her grandmother's and mother's words of medicine and herbs to me. She planted the seed as my father watered it.

I witnessed the most powerful feeling one can observe in humanity—a woman's love for her child. She taught me the feeling of dignity and the manners of back home, those of

respect: respect for humanity and nature, for strangers and those you will one day know. She nurtured the soul of our heritage while my father taught the information, the history, the ceremonies, and the politics. But not the heart—only my mother could do that. He was the mind, and she was the heart, and I am the body.

I am Native. I am Purepecha and Caxcan. I'm a descendant of Villistas, of fighters, of farmers, of healers. I am made up of the thousands who came before me and those who continue to educate me—my elders, my poets, my idols, my enemies. All of these make me who I am.

I am a Zapatista. I am from the bottom and to the left. I wear an eye patch on my right eye and speak of the oppressed working class and their plight. I am a revolutionary nepo baby, one who has seen the world through a page or through the eyes of another.

I am Native, and I am free. My name is Chicueiehecatl. I am a son, a brother, a compa, a farmer—and I am free.

Esmeralda - Resilient, Curious, and Determined

My name is Esme, and I am 17 years old. I live with my mom and three siblings—two sisters and one brother. If I had to describe myself in three words, they would be curious, loving, and adaptable. These words capture who I am because I love learning and trying new things. I always seem to have a collection of random facts about everything, thanks to my love for reading and doing research.

Though I may not always express my emotions openly, when the time comes, I am there for the people I care about. I do my best to help and support them, just as they have always supported me. Life can get a bit crazy at times, which is why I don't like having my plans set in stone. I like to believe that not much fazes me—I tend to go with the flow, allowing myself to adapt to new situations easily.

Coming from a low-income, single-parent home, my mother emigrated from Mexico in search of a better life for herself and her children. I am proudly Chicana, and honoring my heritage is incredibly important to me. Sharing my culture with the world is one way I keep our traditions alive. My roots have greatly influenced my decisions and actions. I've promised myself never to take my mother's hard work and struggles for granted. I've made it my mission to work just as

hard in school and in anything I do so that my future will be bright. Achieving my wildest dreams is not only a promise to myself but also a way to fulfill my mother's greatest hope for me.

One life moment that has shaped me the most is when my dad left our home. For reasons beyond my control, my family was broken. Although the situation was difficult and its aftermath was hard to navigate, I now see how it has positively shaped me as a person.



Through this experience, I've grown in ways I never imagined. I've learned to manage my emotions, becoming more empathetic toward others and their situations. I've developed resilience I didn't know I was capable of and have discovered my ability to overcome challenges.

I've also become more independent and have learned to trust myself again.

This growth has pushed me to work harder in school, improving my grades and striving to graduate with pride—not just for myself, but for my mom. I want to show her that her sacrifices were not in vain and that our family can thrive despite the hardships we've faced.

To me, being a leader in my community means helping out wherever you can, advocating for what you believe in, and wanting the best for your community as a whole. Leadership is about voicing your opinions while recognizing that everyone else's voices and opinions matter just as much. It means thinking not only about yourself but about others as well. Being a leader is about looking ahead,



thinking about the future, and considering the kind of community we will leave behind for those who come after us.

Some dreams and goals I've carried with me since childhood are becoming a better person and helping my family financially. I want to provide the financial security I craved as a child so that my little sister doesn't have to worry about money like I did so many times.

I want to graduate, go to college, and earn a degree, making my mom proud. So many people told her we would struggle without a father, but I want to prove them wrong. I want to show her that her hard work paid off and that she raised her kids to be stronger, better, and more resilient than anyone could have expected.

Clemente - From the Baseball Field to the Classroom: Clemente's Journey of Growth

My name is Clemente. I live with both my parents, an older brother, an older sister, and a younger sister. I believe I am an outgoing, energetic, and funny person. Whenever I'm in a group of people I'm familiar with, I tend to be very outgoing, talking to almost everyone. However, when I'm around people I don't know, I often go quiet and don't talk as much.

It takes me some time to warm up to new people, especially if I don't know them well.

That being said, there are instances where I can be myself with people I've just met. I can't pinpoint exactly what makes certain people easier for me to connect with, but when it happens, it feels nice not having to worry about warming up or making a great first impression.



When I'm with people I'm comfortable with, I can confidently say I'm one of the most energetic people in the group. I tend to be loud and talkative, always trying to spark conversations with everyone. I also love making people laugh. Laughter means a lot to me—it's something I deeply appreciate. I love

laughing because it distracts us, even if just for a moment, from our worries and stresses.

I also believe laughter is contagious. When one person laughs, it makes others feel comfortable enough to laugh too. Sometimes, a few laughs are all someone might need to brighten their day.

A life moment that has shaped me the most would have to be when I realized I needed to take school seriously. Back in my freshman year of high school, baseball was my only priority. I didn't care about school or academics at all. I even received a D in my English class on a progress report, which was my first time ever getting a grade that low. I remember hiding that progress report from my parents until I managed to raise the grade.



At the time, I was so obsessed with baseball that I would stay after practice to lift weights in the fitness room, putting in extra work. But the moment that changed me didn't happen during a game or a practice—it happened over the summer.

It wasn't a physical moment; it was more of a shift in my mindset. I just know that during that summer, something clicked. I stopped being obsessed with baseball and started worrying about my grades and how I could make myself appealing to colleges.

I began taking dual enrollment classes and striving for straight A's on my report cards. That moment of clarity truly shaped me, and I'm grateful for it because it helped me focus on what matters most to me. While that's a subjective statement, focusing on school has made me more responsible, hardworking, and ambitious.

Bryan - A Young Dreamer with Big Goals



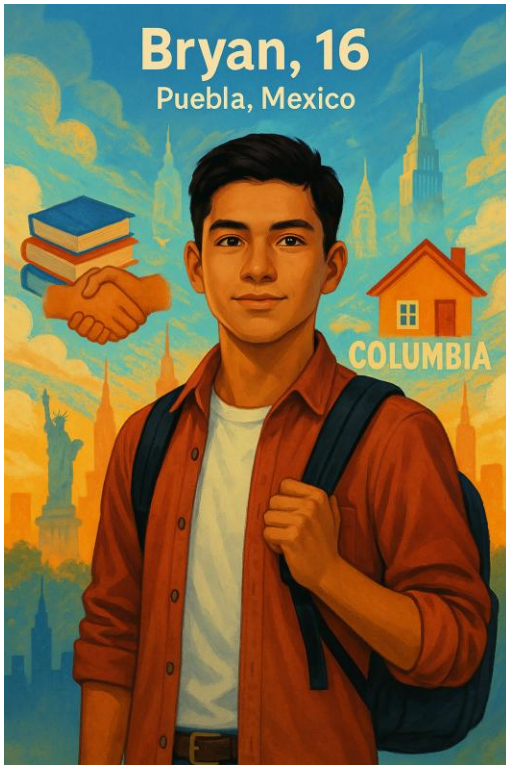
I'm a sixteen-year-old boy who goes by the name Bryan, and my roots originate from Puebla, Mexico. I come from a household of ten, which includes my father, mother, grandfather, four brothers, and two sisters. My family is my biggest support system; they are always there for me, standing by my side no matter

the circumstances.

Three words that describe me best are outgoing, kind, and ambitious. I've always loved socializing with others and making new connections, never afraid to approach someone new. As I socialize, I've noticed that these interactions have a positive impact on both my life and the lives of others. Many people have complimented my personality and acknowledged the joy I bring to those around me. They've told me my presence can uplift the mood and spread positivity. I carry so much joy within myself that I can share it with others through simple compliments, kind gestures, or just by bringing positive energy into their lives.

Ambition has always been a key part of who I am, ever since I was a little kid. I've never doubted my ability to achieve the goals I set for myself. If I don't succeed on my first attempt, I keep trying until I do. I always tell myself to give it my all, so I know I've tried my hardest to reach my goals. One of my biggest goals right now is getting accepted into my dream school: Columbia University. I've always dreamed of attending Columbia because of its excellent academics, vibrant environment, and diverse society.

New York is a place I've envisioned myself living in for a few



years, and Columbia University would help me make that dream a reality. Although this goal may be challenging, I'm determined to focus and work hard to achieve it. Even if the outcome isn't what I hoped for, I'll know that I gave it my absolute best.

Academics have always been a priority for me because I see education as a way to live a better life—not just for myself but for my family as well. Through academic success, I can secure a well-paying job that I will enjoy for the rest of my life. I've considered majoring in either Business Administration or Biochemical Engineering, and I know that whichever path I choose, I'll pursue it with passion and dedication.

Once I've established a stable and reliable source of income, one of my biggest dreams is to improve my parents' lives. I want to buy them a home and retire them, relieving them of the worries they've carried while raising me. This is the least I can do to show my appreciation for all they've done to help shape me into the person I am today.

My father, in particular, has played a significant role in my development as a leader by demonstrating how to lead a family with strength and care. Over the years, I've developed leadership qualities through many experiences and by being exposed to new situations. Some of the leadership skills I've been told I possess include effective communication, problem-solving, relationship-building, and collaboration.

Being an effective communicator is essential because communication is the foundation for growth in any

environment. Understanding how others feel and think helps me connect with them on a deeper level. Problems are inevitable—whether expected or unexpected—but I'm always prepared to handle them. My ability to solve problems quickly and effectively helps maintain progress and ensures that everyone can keep moving forward.

Building relationships is equally important. Trust and credibility are the foundation of strong connections, and by fostering these qualities, I'm able to develop relationships that allow for the exchange of ideas and perspectives. Collaboration is another critical skill I value. Working effectively with others always leads to success, and the better a team works together, the more positive outcomes we can achieve.

This is who I am. While I still have many years ahead of me that may shape and redefine who I am in the future, this is who Bryan Lopez is today—a young man with big dreams, a kind heart, and an unshakable drive to succeed.

Dayanne - A Journey of Compassion, Dreams, and Leadership

If you asked me what three words describe me today, I might not have been able to answer at one point in my life. For a long time, my life was filled with doubt and the stress of trying to be the best, constantly comparing myself to the image of my older brother. But I've since realized that I don't need to measure myself against anyone else. I am determined, I am selfless, and I am full of compassion. I am Dayanne.

One of the most impactful moments of my life happened back in elementary school with my sixth-grade teacher, Ms. T. She was the kindest and most patient teacher I've ever had. At that time, my family was struggling financially, and I, as a child, didn't fully understand our situation. I didn't have a uniform, and when I didn't get credit for wearing one, Ms. T noticed.

She pulled me aside and gently asked about my situation. "What size pants are you, Dayanne? You need to get some points in," she said. I remember feeling nervous and embarrassed, swaying from side to side like I was giving a big speech. I told her my size, and she patted my shoulder,

saying, “You’re going to be okay. I won’t take off points.” Her kindness and compassion stayed with me.



From that moment on, I saw Ms. T as more than just a teacher—she was a motherly figure. She was always there for her students, buying supplies, snacks, and even giving us breaks when we needed them. She taught me the value of a good work ethic and how far compassion can go. If it weren’t for her, I wouldn’t be the person I

am today. To this day, I am grateful. If she happens to be reading this now: Thank you for everything, Ms. T. I will never forget the last hug we shared on graduation day.

My biggest dream growing up was to become a veterinarian. That dream started when my dad brought home a puppy for two-year-old me—a tiny three-day-old pup straight from his litter. I named him Spoty because he had two black spots: one on his right arm and another on his right ear. We grew

up together, and now, at 15 years old, he's a little viejito, but we're still by each other's side. Spoty is my inspiration for wanting to be a veterinarian.

I took care of him the most, and through that, I discovered my passion for animals. I've always been the one to befriend the neighborhood dogs and cats. Leaving behind strays was always hard for me. Spoty taught me responsibility and fueled my lifelong dream of caring for animals. No matter how much time passes, I will always hold onto this dream of being a veterinarian.

My family's roots span from California to Mexico, with my father's side of the family mainly in California. My favorite people will always be my grandparents. They often took care of me and my little brother while my parents worked long hours. My older brother would either be at school or out with friends, but it didn't matter how late my parents came home—our grandparents made every moment special.

My grandmother's cooking was the highlight of our days. She made quesadillas and eggs with frijoles, and my brother, being picky, would always give me his leftovers. We'd spend the afternoons playing games like Lotería, using uncooked beans, spare change, or small trinkets as

markers. I always picked the beans because I liked shaking them in a plastic cup like a maraca.



My grandfather, even though he was bedbound, would still play with us, calling out cards from his bed. He couldn't enjoy many activities, but that never stopped him from being the best grandpa ever. My grandparents taught us about fairness and the joy of simple things. I love them with all my heart. May my grandfather's soul rest in peace—te extraño

cada día, te quiero, Grandpa. And to my grandmother, te quiero con todo mi corazón.

Leadership isn't for everyone, and at one point, I didn't think it was for me either. I didn't like standing out, but through my experiences with friends, family, and loved ones, I learned what it takes to be a leader. Sometimes, people need someone with a louder voice to help them be heard.

I've always been the person who speaks up for my friends when they're too shy to ask or who stands up for myself

when something feels off. Being a leader doesn't require a lot—just a generous spirit and a kind heart. While these qualities might seem small, they can mean so much to someone in need of guidance.

Anyone can be a leader, but to be a positive role model, you must first work on bettering yourself. Kindness is all the world needs, and it starts with small actions.

One of my favorite quotes says it best:

“If you get too worried about what could go wrong, you might miss a chance to do something great.”

Eunice: The Ice Cream Cone That Taught Me Life

I waited all day for an ice cream cone. I had gone to bed thinking about it, I woke up thinking about it, and I went to school thinking about it. It was the first thing I asked my mom about when she picked me up from school. She told me to stop being so intense and reassured me that I would get it soon.

When we finally made it home, I dragged her to the ice cream truck. I was so excited to eat my long-awaited ice cream cone. But on the way back home, I stumbled, and the

entire cone splattered on the ground, breaking my heart. I had only gotten a single lick. I was devastated and inconsolable. My mom kept offering me another cone or a different dessert, but I was so upset over the first one that I completely lost my appetite.



My mom laughed at me for five minutes straight before grabbing my arm and taking me back to the truck for another cone. She told me she didn't understand why I was being so dramatic, that I was being silly for getting so worked up over something that had such an easy fix. She reminded me that everything has a "fix," but I would

never see that if I was busy crying over a spilled cone.

She bought me another cone—bigger than the last—and didn't let a single drop hit the ground.

I went home thinking about how bratty I had been acting earlier. We had been having such a great day before I decided to star in my own melodrama over the most minimal inconvenience. That's all it was—an inconvenience. It wasn't

the end of the world, and I wasn't going to starve. I would've been fine without my ice cream cone.

But what if it had been the end of the world? What if that was the last time I was ever going to eat? I think my mom would've still found a way to smile, maybe even laugh, because she knows how to count her blessings. Gratitude is one of her biggest strengths, and I believe it's the reason for her constant optimism. I realized that if I wanted to be even half as happy as she was, I would have to start counting my blessings too. She didn't let the spilled cone ruin our day, and neither would I.

I also went home reflecting on not only what my mom had said, but how she said it. She knew how to be serious but lighthearted at the same time. She had bought the cone with her own money, but she wasn't upset that I'd lost it. She was just upset that I let it get to me. When she told me to lighten up, she kept her smile, but her tone was serious. She thought the whole situation was funny, laughing as she pulled more cash from her wallet to buy me another cone.

I took her reaction to heart, and the next time I was devastated over losing something I had waited for, worked for, and cared a lot about, I remembered how she laughed and how she was able to be happy despite the negative

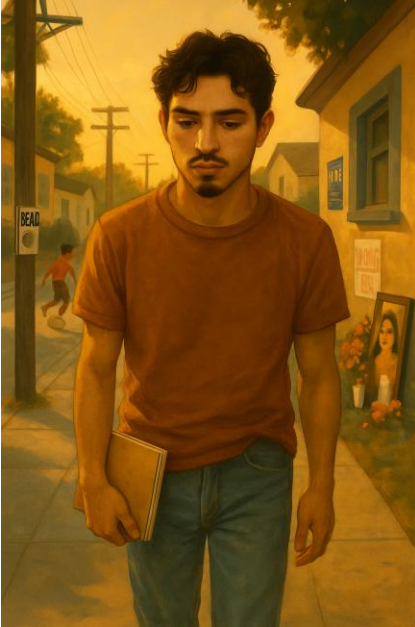
circumstances. I laughed like she did and moved on to different and better things.



As I practiced her “come what may” philosophy, it started to feel like second nature. Being happy and carefree became second nature. As I grew up, the negative circumstances I faced became more challenging, but one of my biggest strengths is optimism. Even when the “going got tough,” I found joy in my mistakes and in the ups and downs of life.

This moment ended up shaping the way I live my life and my core values.

George - Shaping Who I Am



I would describe myself today as caring, dependable, and positive. These qualities weren't always so clear to me, but life has a way of molding you, whether you realize it or not.

The moment that shaped me most was coming to terms with my mother's death. I can't pinpoint exactly when it happened, but I was around fifteen or sixteen when I started to accept it. Looking back, I can see myself maturing during that time. I became more of a man, and what I'm most proud of is that I did it on my own. I've learned and grown as a man without guidance, and that experience changed me as a whole.

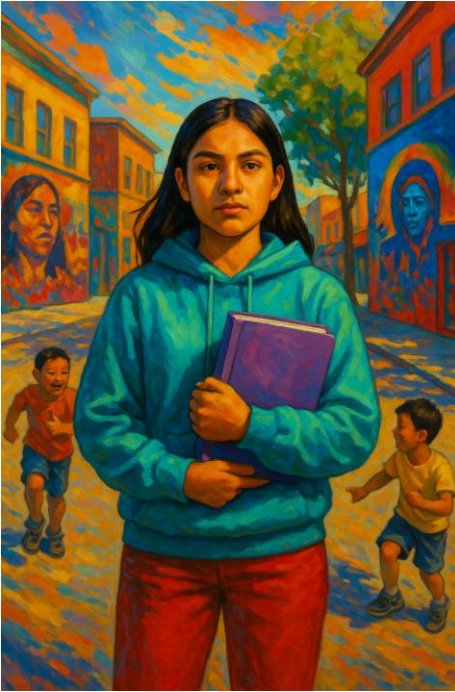
When I think about my childhood dreams and goals, I can't recall anything specific that I aspired to, but I do remember one thing: I wanted to be a kind person. That desire still drives me today. It's not always easy, but I live by the principle of treating others the way I would like to be treated.

For me, being a leader in my community means being the one who makes decisions, ensuring that I take care of my own, and embodying qualities of commitment, confidence, loyalty, and reliability. That's the kind of leader I strive to be.

My roots have a profound influence on my decisions and actions. They make me more empathetic and compassionate. My community and the people in it taught me how to grow and become someone I'm proud of. They showed me the importance of loving one another and always trying to do what's right while doing what you love.



Justina - Roots of a Leader



My name is Justina. I am a 17-year-old student born and raised in the city of Los Angeles in a small neighborhood called Boyle Heights, where I currently live with my parents and siblings.

Growing up in Boyle Heights, I have seen many problems that people in my community go through, such as

homelessness and lack of resources. My family has also been through some issues while living in my community. There have been times when we struggled financially and did as much as we could to get ourselves out of it. These experiences have helped shape me into a person who is inspired to help others and make a positive change in my community.

Having that inspiration to help others has developed my passion for law and business ever since I was a child, and I

have carried it on, hoping to continue pursuing it as I get older. Being in law and having a career related to the field can help me fight for those who face injustices and need help in their times of struggle. And when it comes to business, I hope to create a business that will help others by creating helpful products and/or building new organizations that can provide families with the resources they need but have a hard time finding.

Being a leader in my community means many different things to me, including finding multiple ways to collect and provide resources for others who have a hard time finding them or don't know that there are places that can help them. Being a leader also means being able to lead a group of people with confidence and in a positive way, so that



together we can fight for what we believe are rights, create positive change in our community, and address world problems that will help support people globally.

Apart from being a student leader, if I were to describe myself in three words, they would be cheerful, optimistic, and adventurous. To begin with, I am a very cheerful person and tend to enjoy life by doing many things that I enjoy, including listening to music, dancing, and drawing. Secondly, I tend to be optimistic. I always find a way to improve problems and do my best to fix any mistakes that I make along the way. Lastly, as mentioned, I am a very adventurous person. I love exploring nature around the state of California and taking on new challenges.

CHAPTER 2: Our Dreams

Chicuei: A Vision Rooted in Resilience

In my life, education has always been pushed as a staple of success in modern society. It is something to honor, seen as the end-all, be-all. Without a college degree, we are told, you cannot get a good job, be a respected intellectual, climb the tax bracket, get the car, or secure the house with a mortgage



that becomes your tomb. Nor can you attain the suit that chokes you out or any other so-called “luxury” modern society offers. But this has not been my reality.

I was raised to see education differently—not as an end goal, but as a tool. Like money and media, it is a means

to work the system. Just as a chef selects the finest knife to

craft dishes of cod and lamb, I will wield education as my tool. With it, I will earn my bachelor's degree in anthropology and my Ph.D. in Mesoamerican studies. With my own blood, sweat, and tears, I will create a new system of learning and education. I will carve out my own journey and vision for the future—not just for myself, my family, or my community, but for the world.

This vision has been with me in some way my whole life. In my community, you can walk past churches, Chicano bookstores, Jewish temples, and Japanese centers. But what you don't see are spaces dedicated to our history—the history of Indigenous astronomers and scientists, of governments and laws, of great artisans and artists. You don't hear about the frescoes that adorned our walls or the aquifers that quenched our thirst while other parts of the world were still in caves or defecating in the streets of so-called “grand” cities like Paris.

We are told that history is behind us, that we are descendants of greatness but no longer connected to it. I reject this narrative. We are those people. Our history is not just something to remember; it is something to reclaim. I know many others who feel the same, and this frame of thought is growing. I believe it must grow. Like a semilla

(seed), it needs to be nurtured and watered. I believe centers of education and cultural expression will allow this vision to flourish. Education, practice, and expansion—these are the three sisters of my plan.

A person who shared this vision was Emiliano Zapata. He understood the need for a better world for Indigenous people. He knew autonomy and freedom were essential, as



was the preservation of native culture and identity. He called himself “Indian” and wrote in Nahuatl. He knew the power of our roots and our ideals. Zapata is my leader, my general, mi comandante. I strive to honor his legacy by continuing this fight for cultural revitalization and self-determination.

Yet, like many visions, mine faces a barrier: money. It is the ever-present obstacle, the thing that stalls action and prevents dreams from taking root. But I will not let it stop me. My plan is sound, the people are ready, and I will find the means to bring this vision to life. Becoming a professor will give me the stability to sustain my goals. Through my merit, I will write grants and proposals to fund education, community spaces, and actions that matter.

To myself, I say this: do not stop. Like the snail, you may move slowly, but you must keep moving forward. No matter what stands in your way, no matter how far you are taken from your goal, do not stop. If you stop, you risk being stuck in a pool of slime and sorrow. But if you persist, you will make it. You will build the vision you've carried all your life.

Esmeralda - Finding Myself Beyond Boundaries

During the next five years of my life, I hope to head to college to study business and figure out who I am. I would like to be adventurous, study abroad, and join many clubs where I can learn new things. I want to explore my passions rigorously while also having fun. The most important thing for me in college is to discover who I am as an individual

outside of my community and family. I'd like to determine where I want my life to lead and focus more on my personal goals, such as growing in my spiritual life. I hope to graduate college in a timely manner but also recognize that I shouldn't rush to the finish line. Eventually, I want to secure a stable job so I won't have to rely on my family for support. Instead, I want to be able to support them whenever necessary. I know this won't happen magically—I will have to work hard to



accomplish all my goals, but the end results will be gratifying if I stay committed.

Achieving my goals will not come easily. There is still so much for me to learn. To continue growing on my journey, I believe it is important for me to improve my

patience—not just with others but with myself as well. Sometimes, I struggle with patience and set unrealistically high expectations for myself simply because I want to do my best and make my family proud. I get frustrated when I don't live up to my own expectations, and that frustration doesn't always manifest in the healthiest ways. Besides improving my patience, I also want to work on my time management. There have been times when I signed up for too many activities, hoping to explore different interests and hobbies, but ended up overbooking myself and having to make difficult choices. Recently, I have been managing my time better, but if I want to achieve my goals, these are areas I need to continue improving.

To my future self, I would say: grasp every opportunity that comes your way. I have seen the benefits of stepping out of my comfort zone and participating in various activities and programs. It's important to be involved in the community and take risks. Not everything I have tried has been something I enjoyed, but I have never regretted the things I did. I would also remind myself to pursue things I genuinely enjoy. I know I have missed out on different opportunities because I was afraid to do something alone. Often, I would opt out of an activity entirely rather than step into an unfamiliar situation by myself. I would remind my future self that I don't have to

follow the crowd, and I certainly don't have to hold back just because I am afraid of standing alone.

One of my biggest inspirations is my older sister. As the eldest of four, she has faced numerous trials and challenges in hopes of paving a clearer path for those of us who followed. I deeply admire her resilience and determination—she has endured so much to support us as we grow up. I aspire to be like her because she was the first in our family to go to college. The fact that she navigated the college application process alone, without guidance, is inspiring in

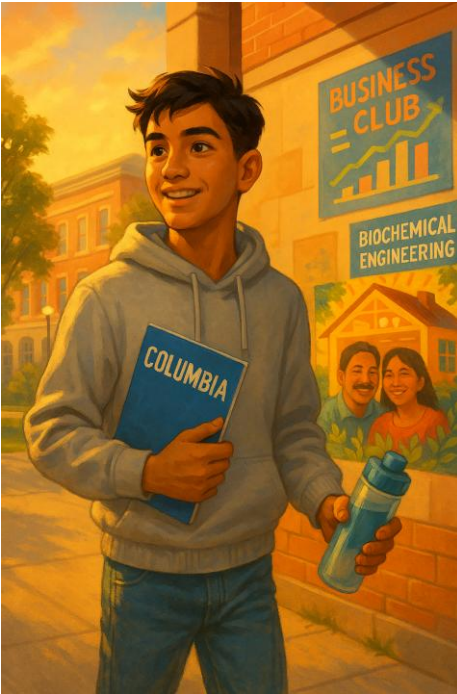


itself. Seeing her thrive today motivates me to trust and believe in myself. She is my greatest supporter, and she continues to inspire me.

When I achieve my aspirations and dreams, I will return to my community to give back. I will come back to my school and teach

students how to manage their finances before they are thrust into adulthood with little financial literacy—just as I will be. I want to give back to my community the same way it has taken care of me throughout the years. I hope to inspire younger generations to make an impact in their community and to care about what is happening around them. It's important to show them that a community is not just a place to live but a space where they can grow, seek help, and thrive.

Bryan - Dreams That Shape My Path



Even when I was a young kid, I have always had an ambitious mindset—always setting my mind on big goals in the hopes of making them a reality as I grew older. My dreams have changed throughout my life various times, but now I'm certain that the dream I have now is the dream for me. My dream is to have the

ability to release both of my parents from worries and stress and enhance the state of my community as a whole. What both my parents and community have done for me is something I'll never be able to repay, but the least I can do is improve their lives. However, this major dream is accompanied by many other dreams.

Most of my dreams follow my academic aspirations. When I graduate high school, I want to feel like I have done enough to get into my dream school. This includes participating in many internships, volunteer experiences, clubs, and overall maintaining a highly praiseworthy GPA. I want to ensure that before I graduate, I have done the most with the time I've had in high school, releasing me from any doubts about getting into my dream school. I once dreamed of becoming the Valedictorian or Salutatorian, but as I grew older, I realized that it didn't matter where I ended up in the rankings as long as I got into my dream school.

My dream school is Columbia, a rigorous but beautiful institution located in the city of New York. Columbia has a strong, well-respected education system offering some of the best programs out there, specifically for Business and Biochemical Engineering. Although it may be difficult to get in, doing so will only bring me one step closer to my ultimate

goal. If I decide to major in Business Administration, I'd gain the knowledge to run my own successful business. I've always dreamed about creating my own hydration product for athletes, so my business would most likely involve that. But, if I decide to major in Biochemical Engineering, I'll aim to improve the health of many in my community. My main goal would be to create a test that can track as many viruses as possible. This would not only be resourceful but would also provide a better understanding of a person's health by targeting many different viruses at one time.



By pursuing either of these paths, I'll be able to achieve an immense amount of wealth. To me, wealth is not about seeing the amount of money increase in my bank account;

wealth is about seeing the number of happy lives increase in this world. Whether I become a successful businessman or a biochemical engineer, I'll have a steady income that allows me to invest in people's lives. My mother and father will finally be able to rest and no longer have the constant mindset of having to work. I'll provide them with daily income, a home, food, and anything and everything that will contribute to their peace of mind.

After that, I'll invest in the improvement of my community by supporting the education system and various community programs. Our education system is very outdated and limited due to the low funding it receives. Students at my school have no access or awareness of certain programs, test preparation resources, books, and much more. Improving education will allow for the evolution of our society as a whole. The programs I'll invest in will aim to reduce two of the major problems my community faces: homelessness and food insecurity. These programs will host daily events that provide housing for the homeless as well as food, which will lead to the betterment of my community.

Although these dreams may take some time, they will never be out of my reach. No goal is ever too far to achieve. If I believe and have faith, then I can reach as far as I want.

Dayanne - A Teacher Like No Other

During my junior year (2023-2024), I met one of my most treasured teachers—Mrs. R. She was the most brutally honest yet caring teacher I had ever known. At first, I didn't understand her. She was one of the youngest teachers at our school, so she related to our generation, yet she would talk about her high school and college years in a way that made us laugh at how drastically different things were back then.



Some days, I felt overwhelmed, like I just couldn't get through the day. She would notice. She always found a way to help, granting me relief when my brain felt like it was

going to explode. With her gentle jokes, she could make anyone laugh, even if her satirical tone sometimes made her humor land a little slowly. Still, she always made the effort to help anyone in need.

From being my teacher to becoming my mentor, I am truly grateful for her. Mrs. R might not realize it, but she taught me a lot—especially how to keep writing by constantly asking myself, “What else?” and “Why?” I miss those little ducks. Just like some people collect rocks (which I do), I collect treasured memories of Mrs. R and the many teachers who have impacted my life. I am so thankful to be at Roosevelt, where I have experienced so much thanks to my past and current teachers.

Looking ahead five years, I imagine it will be my first year after college. While that may be true for some, my path in life will take me through more schooling. Within five years, I hope to begin my veterinary experience and work toward completing my degrees.

My journey might demand more years of education, but I am willing to dedicate that time. My path is like a river that will eventually flow into an ocean filled with marine animals. If it means I’ll be able to help the animals I can’t yet, it will all be worth it. In five years, I see myself at the forefront of an

animal hospital. If not, I hope to contribute from behind the scenes in every way I can.

Achieving this goal is like winning a game of tic-tac-toe. I know I want to go far for college, but leaving the place I call home will be difficult. Knowing that my older brother moved out as soon as he started college reassures me—I can do it too.

I have always dreamed that every person in East LA could see their community become healthier and free of violence. I dream of a world where no one is burdened simply for having less, where people no longer suffer from gun violence

or struggle to access healthcare. I am from Boyle Heights, the place I call home. I am lucky to have the privilege of citizenship, but I see the



struggles of my friends and distant family who don't. I just hope this world doesn't fall into the wrong hands, that education remains available, and that people no longer have to live in fear—both humans and animals alike.

Eunice - Embracing Leadership and Growth

I'm expecting to hear from guest speakers who have made an impact in their community by being good leaders, and my hope is that their stories and advice will inspire and motivate not just me, but everyone attending the conference to try their best to make that same kind of impact. There is power in numbers, and the more Chicano leaders we can inspire, the better it is for the community—at least that's how I see it. I'm excited to hopefully become one of these leaders. I have a deep love and appreciation for my community and its current leaders, and the idea of being one of the people responsible for making the community as great as it is makes me really enthusiastic about going on this trip. I love traveling, experiencing new things, and exploring new places, so I'm especially excited to see Chicago and the type of environment it has. While I'm in Chicago and at the conference, I plan on making sure I am making the most of

my time there by being an active listener and hopefully networking when I get the opportunity.

Before the trip, I want to work on my decision-making skills. I think a good leader should be able to make beneficial decisions for those they are leading. I'm not great at making decisions, especially when I know I'm not the only person being impacted by the choice. I lack the courage and self-confidence to believe that whatever choice I make is the "right" one, or at least have faith that it was a smart and



reasonable move. But I also believe there are no set "right and wrong" choices or answers, and part of being a good leader is also being able to navigate their team through the choices made for the group and

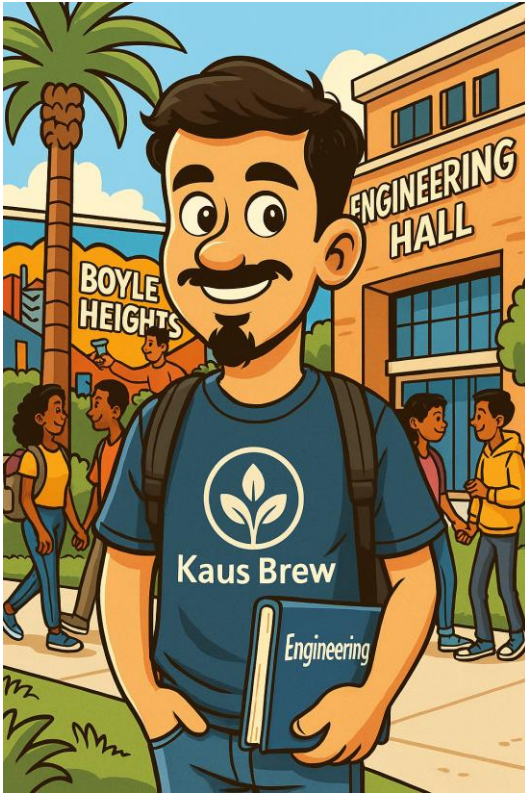
guide them to where they want and need to be.

I also want to work on my delegation skills. I think it's important to be able to empower your team or group without micromanaging, a tendency I see in myself often. I

micromanage when my instructions aren't clear enough, which means my teammates are left confused, and I feel like I have to step in or intervene frequently to help. However, if I can get better at communicating expectations and tasks/goals, then I believe I can cut down on micromanaging. My micromanaging is never a reflection of the team. I always have full confidence in the people I work with, especially when I choose to work with them. I just want that feeling of trust and faith to be felt by the entire team. I'm hoping some of the speakers at the conference will touch on these subjects so I can keep their advice in mind the next time I'm trying to be a leader.



George - Dreams, Goals, and Inspirations

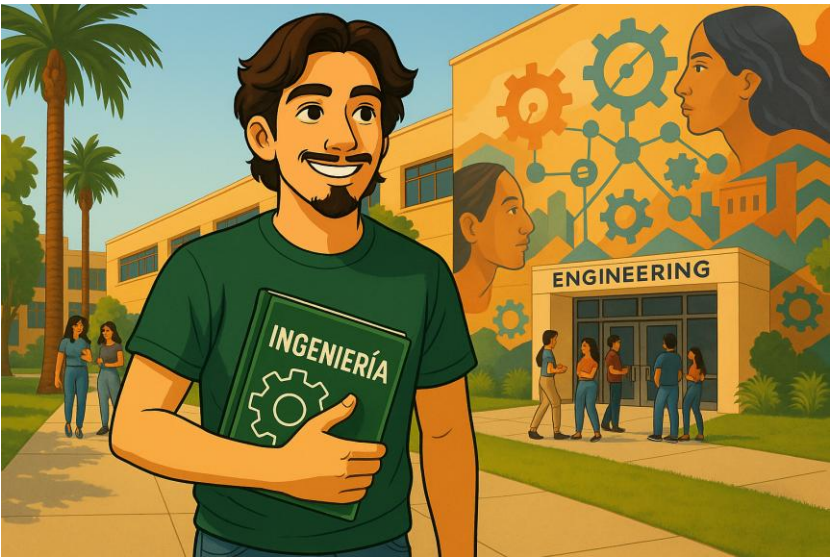


In the next five years, I envision myself graduating with my engineering degree and starting a career in the field. I plan to gain valuable work experience while living independently in California, perhaps in my own apartment. Financial stability is a priority for me, so I intend to save for a down payment on a house. I hope to be

financially secure enough to travel occasionally, balancing work and life. Alongside my personal goals, I look forward to deepening my connection with God, growing both personally and professionally, and sharing my future with my partner.

One dream that I believe could positively impact my community involves working with the youth. I want to guide them by sharing advice about college, career paths, and

opportunities in the engineering field. Growing up in Boyle Heights, I understand how challenging it can be to find the right resources or people to help figure out one's future. I aspire to make that process easier, whether through an after-school program, collaborating with Salesian, or even creating my own workshop. I hope to inspire young people to never stop dreaming and to show them that it's possible to achieve their goals. Specifically in engineering, I want to be



there to support them, even in finding jobs.

When I think of leadership, one person who inspires me deeply is my dad. Despite not having the chance to graduate from high school, he worked hard, eventually securing a better-paying job that allowed him to provide for our family—

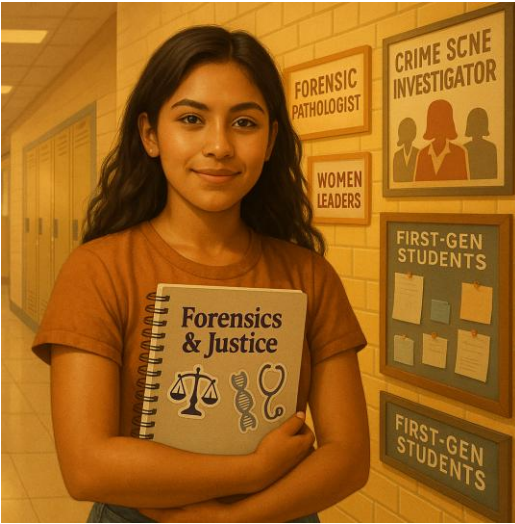
and even afford the occasional night out to eat. Watching him push through challenges and create opportunities for himself has been a constant motivation for me to keep going, no matter how hard things get. His story reminds me that success isn't always about meeting formal requirements or having a smooth start; it's about working hard, being committed, and believing in yourself. His example taught me the true meaning of perseverance, and I'll always carry that lesson with me.

To achieve my goals, I know I need to become more disciplined, dedicated, and focused. These qualities are essential for staying on track and maintaining motivation, especially during tough times. To improve in these areas, I plan to set clear goals, establish better routines, and hold myself accountable for my actions and progress to avoid falling behind.

If I could give advice to my future self, I would tell him that I'm happy with where I am in life right now, but he should be even happier. The younger version of me would be disappointed if I didn't achieve at least some of my goals. I would also remind myself to stay healthy and fit, and to never lose the positive mindset I've carried since childhood.

No matter what, I would encourage myself to always remain optimistic.

Justina - Vision for the Future



In the future, as a senior in high school now, I hope to have accomplished many things. These include, first and foremost, being able to help and continue helping people who need it the most, and

continue advocating for them on issues such as poverty and unfairness. I also hope to have gained many new skills that will help me later in life, including building connections. Connections with industry professionals or others can open many new doors and create new opportunities. I hope to graduate from college as a first-generation student and follow my dreams for my future.

Growing up, I dream of following a career that I am passionate about and that will positively affect me and my community. I hope to become a forensic pathologist or crime scene investigator, where I can help my community by solving crimes and cases that will bring justice to a family or even a community. Apart from my career, I hope to do well in life. I dream of becoming a woman entrepreneur and opening my own business. I also dream of living a stable life, where I can enjoy things that make me happy and be with people who bring me joy. It's always important to focus on oneself, as self-love and self-care are crucial. Everyone should focus on the positive and not just on negatives or things that bring stress.

Many people inspire me to follow my dreams and achieve things I never thought possible. These people include my family and friends. However, the leaders who inspire me the most are women in the fields I want to pursue, as well as women in business. Seeing people break through barriers and social norms helps build my confidence to try harder and become like them. A social norm can be broken and changed into something greater and better. Many times, when I thought of business owners, I always thought of businessmen and never really businesswomen. Now, I follow and listen to stories of successful businesswomen who built

themselves up and are doing amazing work in the business world, inspiring others. The same goes for law. I used to see mostly men in roles such as policemen, judges, and forensic scientists, but now, when I see women in these fields, it inspires me to become just like them and pursue a career I love.

To eventually reach my potential goals and dreams, there are, of course, many things I need to improve and learn. Communication is something I need to improve on so that I can communicate with others better and meet many industry professionals from diverse backgrounds. This will help me network and open many new doors for opportunities in my desired career field. I also need to learn how business works, as well as the law field, to achieve my dream of becoming a professional in my chosen field. Lastly, one important thing I need to learn is



how to take criticism and turn it into something positive that will teach me valuable lessons. Many times, we take criticism badly and bring ourselves down because of it, but being able to take it positively will help you grow as a person and fix whatever you were criticized for. Not all criticism is meant to be harmful.

Right now, as a senior in high school, some advice I would give to my future self is: firstly, don't be afraid to try new things. Trying new things can help you learn how things work and help you gain new experiences and knowledge of things you might not have known before. Another piece of advice would be not to give up on your dreams, even if things get hard. Many times, you might want to give up on something you've dreamed of due to challenges that get in your way. But if you keep trying hard enough, you can break through those problems and accomplish even greater things than you thought possible. Lastly, just be yourself. Being yourself is an important part of many things. Changing yourself to follow norms or rules can affect you as a person and prevent others from seeing your true potential. It might even help break a barrier if you try hard enough to not stay hidden and bring yourself out into the world.

Bianca: Aspirations for the Future



In the next five years, I would like to have graduated from a private university on the East Coast (hopefully Duke or Middlebury), studied abroad, made fun memories, met new people, started traveling the world, and overall, been happy. I would like to have my life together—maybe have an apartment, a house, or be renting somewhere. I would like my future self to keep in contact with friends and be able to travel with them. As of right now, I would like to become a lawyer, so hopefully, in 5 years, I will be ready to go into law school. But if needed, I wouldn't mind giving myself a short break. I know I am asking for a lot from my future self, but I would be happy if I'm just living my best life. I would also like

to set goals for myself every 5 years so I can accomplish a lot and set new goals for myself.

I want to have a job in the law field that makes me excited to work and brings me joy, as well as earning a lot of money so I can give back to my community and clubs/organizations that have helped me throughout my high school years. In many of the school clubs that I am in, I notice that something that limits us is the cost of activities and the financial struggles from some families. For this reason, I would like to be able to donate money in the future when I get a good, comfortable job. As of right now, I would like to become either a business lawyer, an immigration lawyer, or maybe even both. I want to help immigrant families because I saw firsthand how long and stressful it was for my family for my dad to become a resident of the United States. Apart from the long process, there are many times families don't know where to start or who to contact. I want to be there for them because of this long process, and because I know many people in my community who don't have their residency and would appreciate the help.

A leader I admire would be my mom because I've never seen her fail to accomplish something she puts her mind to. The stories she has told me about her time in Mexico made

me realize she has gone through a lot. From having to take care of my three siblings while my dad worked in the U.S. and sent money, to helping my dad find a house for our family once they were here, to now, always helping out at the church, taking care of her grandchildren, helping my aunt with her small business, and making sure the house is clean and there is food on the table. Even though she is always busy with other things, she always makes sure she is there for me when I need a hug or advice. She has always been there to motivate me and push me to be better. She makes sure she attends every school performance, award ceremony, and parent meeting, always encouraging me in some of the crazy ideas and random clubs I have joined.

Since I am the youngest, I feel like I have always been somewhat coddled in a way and don't truly know what independence looks like. I feel that in order to achieve my goals, I will need to gain independence since I want to move far away and my family won't be physically near me. I also feel like I need to express myself better because I often bottle things up and try to hide them away. I need to be able to express myself because I'll be moving to a place where people don't know me or my habits. They might misinterpret something and it might ruin friendships or opportunities.

Something I want my future self to remember is: “You never know unless you try” and “What’s meant for you will come towards you.” I would also remind myself to take breaks, breathe, and spend time with friends and family. Also, don’t stress over having to be perfect—mistakes are just a learning experience. You only live once, so live your life to the fullest. And don’t be afraid to ask for help.

CHAPTER 3: Preparing for the Conference

Chicuei - Finding Myself in the Fog of Chicago



In my time in Chicago,
I wish to find myself—
Lost in the fog of my
mind.

I lost my mind in the
fog of unknowing, the
fog of uncertainty, the
fright of the new world
that comes barreling

like a truck at 80 miles an hour, charging across the road of time. Bumping and crushing all in its dispatch, with no end and no need for waiting. I fear this monster of a machine that is adulthood. It haunts me constantly; it is unstoppable and unwavering.

I hope to find myself in Chicago.

I hope to use my time as a reflection of my mind.

I cross the line that is never crossed again, the line that society has claimed—it is now okay to drive, to shoot, to

vote, to wed, and to die for a flag. 30,000 feet in the heavens, I will blow out my candles on a complimentary peanut packet.

"Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me"—my chant, my cry.

In Chicago, I hope to know myself.

Oh, how people will yell and tell me I'm a natural-born leader and how I am so mature and how I speak so well and how I should become blank and how I should meet blank—and this will occur over and over, as it has before. And they are right; I will do blank and blank.

"I'd love to meet blank and blank," I will say with a smile—not a fake smile but a genuine smile of joy and intrigue.

But—I know when I get back to my hotel bed and turn on, tune in, and drop out, that ever-lurking feeling will return and hit me like a ton of bricks. I'll feel numb, and the whole day will flow right over me, and I'll forget. Like I always forget.

But this trip will be different.

Will I find myself in Chicago? The question rattles on and on in my brain like a bad song. But I feel I will. I'll make those

opportunities with others bear fruit. I will do blank and blank. I will meet you. I will shake your hand. I will have a good conversation.

"Yes, I would love to know about your nonprofit. I would love to see your members list. Yes, you can have my number."

I will be proactive in this great opportunity. Like I always am. Like I am good at.

This is my gift.

I can talk and talk and talk, about any subject and to whoever. No matter how similar or different. This is my strength, and I will overcome it.

I will use Chicago as an opportunity to grow more of my skills.

Like-minded minds swirling in a pool of consciousness. Moving and shaking, enveloping one another in the envy of anti-socials. Basking in their element. This is how I picture this. This is what I am expecting, whether I am right or wrong or too hopeful. I will see, and I will stand corrected or stand on the hill of my intuition.

Chicago is a grand opportunity for my mind.

Being with leaders. Being with people who move forward.

Lento pero avanzado—like a snail, this is my way. Not turning back, and being with others, I wish to exercise my mind and my intuition.

I hope to build my field of view to a wide lens instead of a fisheye. More accurate and clear.

How far I hope this will take me and how I will be changed for the better by it. No matter what happens across the line, I know I will be alright as a leader and a man.

I know Chicago will do me some good. As all trips do. But one like this—it will be a cleanse and an exercise all in one.



Esmeralda - Stepping into the Unknown—Chicago Awaits



As the day of our trip approaches, I feel both excited and nervous. This trip to Chicago will be a first for me, and it feels somewhat surreal. I never imagined having an opportunity like this, and it's thrilling to think

that I will be the first in my family to travel to Chicago. The city is full of rich history, vibrant culture, and so much more! I am especially excited to explore and, of course, try some deep-dish pizza!

In preparation for the conference, I believe one skill I need to improve is taking initiative. While I can confidently engage in conversations, I often hesitate to approach people on my own. I tend to wait for others to initiate interactions, but I know that in a completely new environment with unfamiliar faces, I will need to step up. To create meaningful connections and maximize this experience, I must take the initiative.

I expect this leadership conference to be both transformative and inspiring. I anticipate engaging in insightful discussions with like-minded individuals and listening to experienced leaders who have valuable knowledge to share. I imagine there will be workshops on topics such as community involvement and leadership in various settings. I hope to explore different aspects of leadership and the steps necessary to grow into an impactful leader.

From the speakers, I hope to learn about their journeys—how they overcame challenges, the steps they took to achieve success, and the lessons they gathered along the way. I am eager to hear about their personal experiences and the emotions they encountered while striving for their goals. Understanding their struggles and triumphs will provide me with valuable insights as I navigate my own path.

To represent my community at the conference, I will present myself with dignity and respect. I will follow all rules, attend every session on time, and actively participate in discussions. Beyond how I speak to others, I recognize that representation is also about how I carry myself. I strive to portray my community in the best light, ensuring that we are seen as so much more than the stereotypes often portrayed in the media.

Bryan - Embracing Leadership and Overcoming Fears

During my attendance at the conference, I hope to be astonished by the many leadership skills demonstrated throughout the event. Whether it includes communication skills, problem-solving skills, collaboration skills, or others, each is an essential part of becoming a leader. If I'm able to



expand my understanding of these crucial skills during the

conference, I will only enhance my leadership abilities, making me a better leader.

A skill I specifically want to target is public speaking. At times, I get anxious and nervous when speaking in front of large audiences. I'm not sure why—it just happens naturally. Even when I'm confident in what I'm going to say, I still tend to speak quickly, making it difficult for others to understand me. This is something I want to improve because if I ever need to present important information to a large audience, I want them to clearly understand my message.

During the conference, I am aware that I will be representing my community, Boyle Heights, as I engage and participate. I want my community to be portrayed as ambitious and resilient. Ambition shows our determination to accomplish our goals—no matter what obstacles arise, I want attendees to know that we will never give up until we succeed. The more goals we accomplish as a society, the more success and happiness we bring to our community.

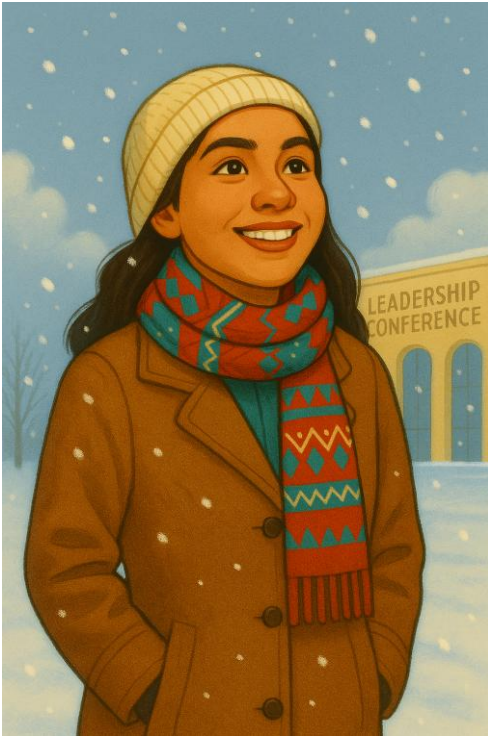
I also want people at the conference to recognize the resilience of Boyle Heights. My community is predominantly Hispanic, and many Hispanics face struggles due to a lack of citizenship. Despite these challenges, they continue to persevere and provide for their families. Even though they

are often unfairly labeled, this does not stop them from pursuing their dreams. I want others to know that our ambitions are fueled by resilience, allowing us to thrive.

I am also aware that we will be flying to Chicago for the conference. When I first heard this news, I was both excited and scared. I was excited because I have always wanted to visit Chicago—a beautiful city with amazing food, fun activities, and a lively atmosphere. Traveling also fulfills one of my desires to explore the world. However, I was scared because I have always feared flying. The thought of a plane crash has been one of my greatest fears, but this opportunity gives me a chance to overcome it.

Additionally, I was nervous about being away from home for an extended period. I tend to miss my family, especially my mom. However, I plan to study out of state in the future, so this experience will help prepare me for that transition. Ultimately, my excitement outweighs my fear, and I am looking forward to this trip. I plan to take full advantage of every opportunity that comes my way. I hope this journey will shift my perspective in ways that allow me to grow as a person.

Dayanne - A Journey to Representation



At the leadership conferences, I expect to see people like me—people who represent my minority communities. I don't have much experience attending conferences like these, but I am excited for everything I will learn. One thing I know for sure is that I want to gain insights on how to be successful in

any career.

I wonder if there will be women who have found both success and fulfillment in their professional lives. I aspire to become one of those women! Before embarking on this amazing and snowy journey to Chicago, I want to better understand how to speak in professional settings. Talking to adults might be intimidating, but I know that if I find common ground, I can connect and build meaningful relationships.

I want to present myself to the speakers as a role model representing my community. I may be just one person, but I know that everyone else in my group understands the struggles and pressures of growing up in a marginalized community. At these conferences, I hope to raise awareness, receive guidance, and bring home new ways to support my community.

I have never traveled this far before, especially without my family. Every summer since I was born, I have traveled to Mexico and spent time with my relatives. The weather there was unpredictable—days of endless rain leading to floods and blackouts, followed by sunshine and rainbows as the plants thrived once again. I will always remember jumping in the rain, riding my bike, and feeling the refreshing breeze afterward.

This time, though, my trip will be very different—it will be freezing and snowy. I am both excited and nervous. I have experienced cold weather before, but I hear it will be snowing when I arrive. Either way, I can't wait to see my first snowfall!

Eunice - Embracing Leadership and Growth



I'm expecting to hear from guest speakers who have made an impact in their community by being good leaders, and my hope is that their stories and advice will inspire and motivate not just me, but everyone attending

the conference to try their best to make that same kind of impact. There is power in numbers, and the more Chicano leaders we can inspire, the better it is for the community—at least that's how I see it. I'm excited to hopefully become one of these leaders. I have a deep love and appreciation for my community and its current leaders, and the idea of being one of the people responsible for making the community as great as it is makes me really enthusiastic about going on this trip. I love traveling, experiencing new things, and exploring new places, so I'm especially excited to see Chicago and the type of environment it has. While I'm in Chicago and at the conference, I plan on making sure I am making the most of my time there by being an active listener and hopefully networking when I get the opportunity.

Before the trip, I want to work on my decision-making skills. I think a good leader should be able to make beneficial decisions for those they are leading. I'm not great at making decisions, especially when I know I'm not the only person being impacted by the choice. I lack the courage and self-confidence to believe that whatever choice I make is the "right" one, or at least have faith that it was a smart and reasonable move. But I also believe there are no set "right and wrong" choices or answers, and part of being a good leader is also being able to navigate their team through the choices made for the group and guide them to where they want and need to be.

I also want to work on my delegation skills. I think it's important to be able to empower your team or group without micromanaging, a tendency I see in myself often. I micromanage when my instructions aren't clear enough, which means my teammates are left confused, and I feel like I have to step in or intervene frequently to help. However, if I can get better at communicating expectations and tasks/goals, then I believe I can cut down on micromanaging. My micromanaging is never a reflection of the team. I always have full confidence in the people I work with, especially when I choose to work with them. I just want that feeling of trust and faith to be felt by the entire team. I'm

hoping some of the speakers at the conference will touch on these subjects so I can keep their advice in mind the next time I'm trying to be a leader.

George - Leadership and Growth



As I prepare for the leadership conference, I anticipate meeting many people like me—people who are trying to become leaders and make their communities better places. I expect them to bring knowledge and inspiration, helping me grow as a person. I also look forward to learning new skills that can help me

develop my leadership abilities.

From the speakers, I hope to learn how to be more patient, resourceful, and a critical thinker. I am eager to hear their unique perspectives on leadership, to learn from their stories, and to gain a deeper understanding of what it takes

to lead effectively. I hope to leave with new ideas that could make my community a better place—or at least help me grow so I can teach others.

There are specific leadership skills I know I need to improve before the trip. I struggle with being fully prepared—I tend to procrastinate and do things at the last minute, which I know won't work at the conference. This time, I plan to improve my time management skills. I also need to work on being more reliable and paying closer attention to my surroundings, so I can absorb all the information available.

Knowing I'll be traveling to Chicago fills me with genuine excitement. It will be my first time on a plane, as I've never been outside California. I feel grateful and thrilled to have this opportunity, and I hope Chicago will be as wonderful and beautiful as I imagine. I'm a little nervous about the cold, though—I've heard Chicago is chilly, and I don't own winter clothes since it's always hot in Los Angeles. I'll need to prepare for that weather.

I plan to represent my community during the conference by sharing my personal experiences growing up in Boyle Heights. I'll talk about both the challenges and the positives of my upbringing. I also plan to share my experiences as a leader, highlighting my role in the Salesian community and

explaining, in my own words, what Salesian does. Most importantly, I'll make sure to share my ideas and be a voice for the youth.

Justina - Preparing for the Conference



As we approach the day of the leadership conference, I find myself filled with questions and expectations about what lies ahead. First and foremost, I hope to gain new knowledge on different topics I hadn't encountered before—

insights that will broaden my perspective and help me in the future. Another expectation I have is for the conference to be well-organized with a set schedule. A structured schedule will help everything run smoothly, benefiting both the organizers and attendees like me. Lastly, I hope to feel welcomed. Feeling welcomed is essential; it can make a person feel they belong and make them want to be there, unlike places where you feel unwelcome and eager to leave.

Regarding the speakers, I look forward to learning about their past experiences and backgrounds—how those journeys helped shape who they are today. Everyone has a unique story, and I hope to hear advice that will positively influence my future. The guidance and insights from these speakers could inspire me to grow and improve in many areas of my life.

Before I attend the conference, I also set expectations for myself. I need to work on my communication skills to confidently introduce myself to new people, creating connections that might benefit me in the future. Additionally, I want to enhance my creative thinking skills so I can respond quickly to questions and contribute meaningfully to discussions.

When I learned about the opportunity to visit Chicago, I felt a surge of excitement. I love traveling and discovering new places, and this trip aligns with my passion for exploring the world. It's a chance to step outside my comfort zone and gain valuable experiences.

Lastly, I hope to represent my community proudly. I want to share my background, culture, and the unique aspects of my heritage to raise awareness and appreciation. Although I don't have all the details figured out yet, I'm confident I'll

discover more ways to represent my community during the conference.

Bianca - The Leadership Conference Experience



This will be my first leadership conference that is far from home and will last multiple days. I have been to a few conferences, but they were either during school as a field trip or on the weekend, lasting only one day. My first

leadership conference focused more on careers in the performing arts industry. They talked about their jobs and awards but didn't get to share any personal stories because of time constraints. Another conference I attended was very student-led and showcased projects about environmental justice. I also presented a project on lead in our soil and water. I hope this conference will be very interactive and allow us to talk to people from different groups. I hope we

don't have to sit down for the entire conference and are allowed to participate in some fun activities.

I hope to hear some motivational stories about how the speakers got to where they are today. I want to know if they had any struggles growing up and why they chose the careers they did. I would also like to hear about their values and where their roots come from. I hope some speakers have careers similar to the one I want to pursue. I would like to hear their perspectives on working in that specific field, along with some pros and cons. I would also appreciate tips about university and how their university experiences were. Since I will be attending university in the fall, I want to hear their stories to help prepare myself and ease some of my jitters.

Before this trip, I would like to improve my leadership skills in expressing my thoughts. Very often, I find myself doubting myself and holding back from expressing what I believe, in fear of being wrong or judged. Although I've slightly improved, I would like to fully be able to ask anything without fear of judgment. I also need to communicate more with people outside my friend group. I like meeting new people and making more friends, but sometimes I struggle with

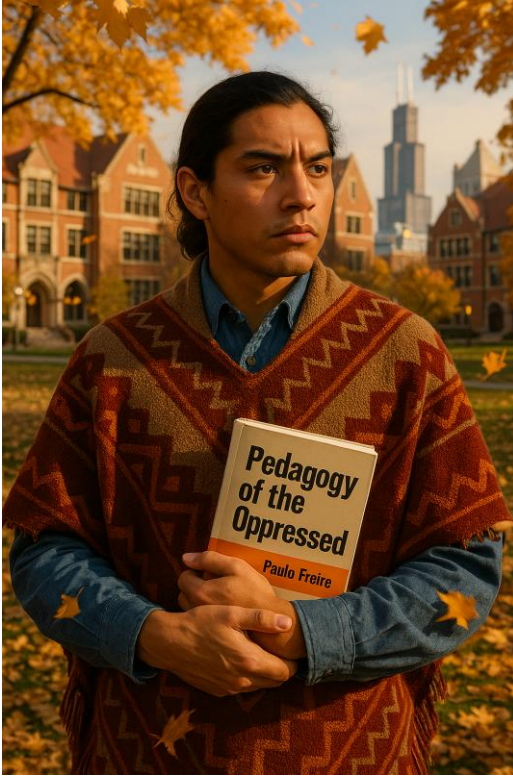
starting conversations because of the awkward silence. However, once I get the conversation going, it's always fun.

I am very excited about traveling to Chicago. Although I'm a bit nervous about flying because I get scared something bad will happen, like an accident, losing something valuable, forgetting something important, or missing a flight. I tend to overthink. I have traveled without family once, so I'm not necessarily worried about being homesick, but I will miss seeing Billy. I worry he will be upset when I return, thumping his foot at the sight of me. But other than that, flying isn't that bad. The only bad part is when my stomach feels funny during takeoff and landing. I have never been to Chicago, and I've heard there's a possibility of snow. I've talked to some students from last year, and they only had good memories from their trip, aside from the struggle of jet lag. I am ready for new experiences and making more memories.

I plan to represent my community during this conference by staying present and fully absorbing the experience. By being present, we show that we appreciate the opportunities, allowing them to continue inviting us. This way, more students will be able to attend in the future. I will proudly represent Boyle Heights and be respectful of any policies and rules they may have.

CHAPTER 4: During the Conference

Chicuei - Chicago – An Educational Pilgrimage to Leadership



My education has always been very different and unconventional. I was homeschooled, specifically in a style called “unschooling,” which focused on a more hands-on and critical approach. This was within a very proud Purépecha, Caxcan, and Anahuac home. I was taught by books, by mentors, by

teachers, and by my community. With this came independence and a deep love of freedom—something many don’t get to experience in a city like Los Angeles or even in the countryside. But with this also came a cost: my education was very isolated because of this disconnect and

often incompatible (though, in my opinion, superior). But incompatible nonetheless.

Coming into school, I was told to do things in a robotic and conformist way, not in a critically thinking manner. I came from reading books like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which spoke about teaching and learning through a critical lens, and *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, which encouraged questioning everything. These books taught me that education is about learning, and to truly learn, you must ask, Why are things the way they are? But this was not my experience in the public education system.

After 14 years of hands-on field trips, college lectures, self-study, community organizing, and workshops, suddenly sitting in an institution that lacked the same level of freedom was difficult. It was different, and it was a major obstacle to overcome. It felt very much like I was being chained down and held back by the institution—and in many ways, it still does.

This isn't to say I don't value education or see it as important. It is valuable and useful. I believe university will be more aligned with my learning style because it focuses on what I want to study. It will allow me to reach my life goals and my aspirations for my community.

Higher education will offer a more freeing and stimulating academic experience. Universities have resources and professors who can teach anthropology in a way that is more useful and relevant to me. I hope to stay in academia and become a professor one day. Attending university seminars has been a normal part of my life—I have been going to lectures and symposiums on Mesoamerica and Zapatismo since I was young. My family would either attend or facilitate these seminars, making them a core part of my homeschooled education. Going to college will also support my goal of creating my own *calmecac* (a Mesoamerican school) for my community, where they can learn about themselves and their history.

As I entered high school, I often felt intellectually inferior—not because I lacked knowledge, but because teachers and staff treated me that way. That is how the system is set up. However, there were people in my corner—those who supported me, who fought for me, and who encouraged my political and cultural work. That helped a lot. The teachers who gave me room to grow and think freely, rather than forcing me to conform, were the ones who truly stimulated my mind. That was when I felt truly educated instead of mentally restricted and, at times, even enslaved.

For example, in my AP U.S. History class, I frequently argued with the teacher because the textbooks were overly simplistic and lacked nuance. They did not mention the Iroquois influence on the American Revolution and the creation of the Senate and government structure. They did not discuss the importance of property and how it shaped American history. They did not acknowledge the Banana Wars or the significance of American imperialism in the 1800s. But I did. I spoke about these things, and I was told I was wrong, that it wouldn't be on the test, or that what I was saying was irrelevant—even though history is not just a series of facts, but a complex web of interconnected events and influences.

This was just one class, for one semester, over a few months. But I have always had at least one class like this—often multiple in a single year. And this has been an ongoing challenge. There has been no room for dialogue or deeper discussion. Instead, I was repeatedly told to stay quiet and do as I was told. This was completely different from my previous education. I was raised and taught to ask why and to question everything—to understand topics from the bottom up, in every aspect. But that has not been my experience in the public school system.

Esmeralda - A Skyward Journey—Reflections on the Trip



After Takeoff: As the plane takes off, I feel a bit nervous flying to a new state. I don't know what to expect, and despite having flown before, this time feels different—exciting in a new way. Usually, I travel with my family, not with people

from school, so this experience is refreshing. I find it fun to see the clouds from above and watch how the cold air fogs up the glass.

I did have some fears and concerns about flying in these conditions. The weather wasn't ideal, which could affect the flight. While boarding, I was also worried about losing my ticket or wallet—my biggest fear because, without them, I would be stuck. Additionally, hearing about recent plane crashes made me a bit uneasy about the flight.

I wasn't traveling on a plane for the first time, but this was my first trip without my family. That, in itself, made the experience feel new and exciting.

First Impressions of Chicago: I imagine Chicago to be cold—but not unbearably so. When shopping for clothes, my older sister insisted on buying essentials for extreme cold while I tried to put everything back. I picture Chicago as a big city, blanketed in snow, with heavy traffic and a lively atmosphere.

I was definitely nervous during takeoff. The flickering lights and the excessive shaking of the plane made me anxious. My knowledge of plane crashes didn't help, but I managed to stay calm and avoid thinking of worst-case scenarios.

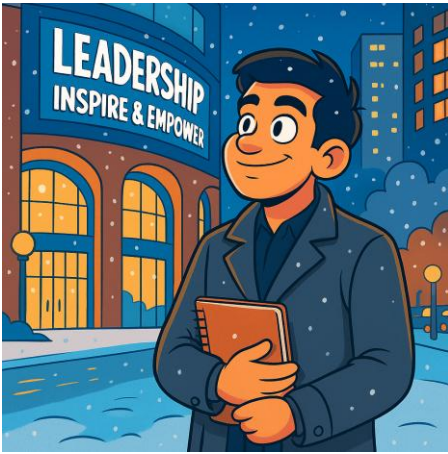
Night Reflections: After the first day, I feel extremely cold but relieved to be indoors. The exhaustion from last-minute packing and lack of sleep is catching up to me—I just want to knock out.

Tomorrow, I expect it to be even colder but more manageable after a good night's rest. I look forward to meeting new people and learning from this experience. I am excited about the opportunities ahead.

I hope breakfast is delicious and that I get to see snowfall for the first time. It would be amazing to witness snow falling—something I have never experienced before.

If I could bring someone on this journey, it would be my little sister. Today is her birthday, and I know she loves to travel. She just turned 15, and this trip would have been a perfect celebration for her. I miss her, and I wish she could share this experience with me.

Bryan - New Connections, New Perspectives



Before leaving home, I prayed and kissed my Bible, which helped ease my fear of flying to Chicago. This was not my first time on a plane, but it was my first time traveling with people I did not know well. Although I was

unfamiliar with them, this was the perfect opportunity to build new friendships.

I imagined Chicago to be beautiful and cold, and I was right about its beauty. The city is filled with bright lights and snow, adding a sense of joy to the environment. However, I

underestimated just how cold it would be! Fortunately, I came well prepared to stay warm.

Tomorrow, I will attend my first conference, and I hope to witness well-planned and inspiring presentations. I especially hope that one of the speakers is a business CEO. I am highly interested in pursuing a career in business, so if I can connect with a CEO and establish a networking relationship, that would be truly phenomenal. I would love to gain insights from someone who not only expands my knowledge of the business world but also encourages and inspires me to continue striving toward my goals.

After attending three conferences, I unfortunately did not meet a business CEO, but I did meet incredible people. The one who stood out the most was Ovi Velasquez. I see a lot of myself in him—his character and personality mirror my own. He had the ability to make the entire audience smile while also providing valuable insights on how to create a networking support group using Chrome extensions like LeadLeaper and FindThatLead. He was kind enough to take a photo with me and spend three minutes giving me advice on how to pursue my business career. I am truly grateful for the opportunity to meet such an inspiring person today.

Later, I attended a leadership conference that covered the fundamentals of leadership qualities. While much of the information was familiar, it still enhanced my knowledge. The most valuable lesson I took away was a quote: "Be a leader, not a boss." This resonated deeply with me because I aspire to start my own business and organization one day. I do not want to be seen as an unsentimental boss—I want to build strong, meaningful relationships with my team and create a family-like atmosphere.

The last conference I attended focused on the Latino vote, and it opened my eyes to how uninformed I was about this issue. I now realize the power that our vote holds, and I hope to share this awareness with my peers in Los Angeles.

On the second day of the conference, I attended two sessions: the Resilience Conference and the Design Thinking Conference. The resilience session stood out to me the most because Ms. Martha emphasized the importance of truly understanding our culture. My ancestors come from Puebla, Mexico, and they have deep-rooted traditions that I need to explore further. Her storytelling was also incredibly powerful—she reminded me that when we share our own stories, we are also telling the stories of our parents, who

laid the foundation for us. I admired the way she acknowledged her parents' hard work and dedication.

The Design Thinking Conference provided valuable information, but the group activity was not as engaging. My group was not taking it seriously, so I ended up doing most of the work. Nevertheless, I gained useful insights on how to develop and execute a successful plan when creating a product.

As our trip came to an end, I felt a mix of sadness and gratitude. Sad because I was leaving Chicago and unsure if I would ever return. Grateful because not everyone gets to experience something so incredible. I was surrounded by ambitious, successful Latinos, which was truly inspiring.

I looked forward to returning home and reuniting with my family. When I finally saw my mother and sisters, our hug was filled with true love. What I will carry with me forever from this trip is the realization that Latinos are just as capable as anyone else of achieving success.

Dayanne - First Time in the Windy City



I had never traveled without my family before, and the thought of it worried me—it was my time to embrace independence. Though everything went smoothly, I was still anxious about being alone. Every summer since I was born, I had traveled to Mexico via Tijuana Airlines, so this was my first time flying out of LAX and navigating its unfamiliar halls.

Since I have been flying my whole life, I have grown to love takeoffs and landings. This time, the takeoff and landing were so smooth—it felt satisfying, like a gentle rollercoaster. I wished it had lasted longer.

On this trip, I was accompanied by my friend Chicuei Ehecatl. Though we were together, we were seated five rows apart on the plane. The funny part? We both wanted window seats—and we both got them! A win-win situation.

I had imagined Chicago to be cold yet beautiful. Turns out, it was FREEZING and beautiful. Seeing the snow-covered landscapes from above the clouds was ethereal. But arriving at the hotel was another story—I was bundled up, yet the wind and remnants of the previous night's blizzard pierced through me. My lungs burned from the icy air. Chicuei and I laughed as our hot breaths formed puffs of smoke like dragon fire. Despite wearing cotton gloves, my hands were freezing. I know tomorrow will be just as cold, so I'm going to bundle up even more.

Day one of the conference started with Olvi Vasquez, a motivational speaker. His story deeply resonated with me, as it reminded me of my boyfriend's mother and her experiences. Hearing about Olvi's hardships growing up helped me understand what it must have been like to live in a small Guatemalan village. One of his lines stood out to me: "Soy Guatemalan, soy Chapín." It reminded me of a poem my boyfriend wrote about his Guatemalan pride and heritage.

From Olvi, I learned one major career lesson: "Never. Give. Up." He told us that the worst thing an employer can say is no, so we must keep pushing for a yes. Dedication and persistence will get us where we want to be.

Another speaker, Refugio Atilano, author of *The Latino Leadership Playbook*, emphasized the power of being Latino/Latina. He taught me the importance of standing out. He encouraged us to be proud of our culture, to be adaptable in any situation, and to build strong networks—because you never know who might hold the knowledge or opportunity you need.

Day two of the conference brought Gabe Salazar, who taught us how to give impactful speeches. His personal story about never knowing his father was touching—he said, “He missed out on having a good kid.” While I couldn’t fully relate, I knew that others in the audience could.

Later, Chicuei and I attended a mental health session led by Alice Jordan. She shared a powerful quote: “You can’t fill other people’s cups if yours is empty.” She bravely spoke about her suicide attempt in college and how she now works as a social worker helping Latino children. One story that shook me was about a six-year-old Latino boy who wrote a suicide letter in crayon.

Jordan stressed the importance of breaking the stigma in Latino communities, where feelings are often ignored or dismissed. **Mental health matters.**

George - Chicago – My First Flight and a Life-Changing Experience



After the plane took off, I felt a sudden sense of fear. I was in shock, like it finally hit me—I'm getting on a plane going to Chicago, and anything can happen. At first, I felt a little anxious because this was my first time flying, and knowing that it wouldn't be with family made me

even more worried. But then I realized that I shouldn't be worried about something like this, that everything would be okay. I just kept reminding myself of that. After the first wave of anxiety hit, I made sure to calm my mind and stay positive, and it worked. I became happy and ecstatic that this was my first time on a plane. I honestly think Chicago will be beautiful.

I've talked to last year's alumni who went to Chicago, and they explained pretty much how things would go and what their favorite parts were. They also mentioned that it was very cold. So, in my head, I already have an idea of what it would be like.

After my first day in this strange and new place, I felt very satisfied and pretty tired. This place is beautiful, and knowing that it snows here and there will be a chance of snow tomorrow just makes me that much more excited. I couldn't be more grateful to be here. I imagine tomorrow will be a pretty long and tiring day, but I'm still very excited to attend the conference and hear everyone's ideas and stories, so that makes up for it. I expect it to be a comfortable environment where anyone can share their thoughts, and, well, that's only for the conference. I'm also very excited to explore more of Chicago. I've seen some of its beauty today, but I just know there is so much more that I can't wait to dive into.

If I could have anyone else on this journey, I would choose my closest friend—my girlfriend. She was an alum who also attended this leadership conference last year, and I can just hear in her voice how much she loved it here. I'm so happy I could attend the same conference she did because all I

heard was positive things. I wish she could have been here by my side, enjoying the beauty of Chicago with me.

After my first lecture, I felt heard, I felt seen, I felt like—woah, I can really accomplish the things that seem impossible. It was a shocking moment. I was so surprised to hear his story about where he grew up and how he's changed so much to become a millionaire. He taught me how to land a job and have a higher chance of being hired if you even do one of the many steps he taught us. One of the steps he shared, which I thought was the most important, was contacting someone higher up for the job you're applying for and asking them, "What can I do to earn your position?" I really think this was a valuable lesson about landing a job.

Another lecture I attended was called "Neuro-Spicy Leadership," and I would say this one was interesting. It taught me how to use your ADHD. You don't need to have ADHD, but this meeting focused on people who did and using it in a positive way, transforming ideas for the better. They taught us to utilize our quick thinking and use it for innovation.

At the airport, about to take a flight back home, I was hit with an overwhelming emotion of sadness. I didn't want to leave. I didn't want to be home, seeing the same things I see every

day. I still wanted to explore the beauty of Chicago, meet new people, and enjoy my time there. There was so much more I wanted to do. But that dream ended. I came to realize I was finally heading home to my family, to my friends, to all the people close to me, and I couldn't wait. I could just see the people close to me asking so many questions about my trip, how the flight was, and what I'd learned. I couldn't wait to share all my experiences with them. The first person I wanted to see and share my experiences with was my girlfriend. She's my best friend, the one I always tell everything to, so I couldn't wait to talk to her.

This really was a blessing—being able to attend this conference. I will remember this for the rest of my life. This was my first time so far away from home, and the things taught at the conference will always stick with me. The most important thing I learned was to always open yourself up to opportunities and to believe in yourself no matter what. Even before the results come in, I shouldn't let anything hold me back.

Justina - Discovering Chicago – A Journey of Growth and Snowfall



1st day: On the day of the Chicago trip, before we got on the airplane, I was really excited. I slept pretty late the night before because I was packing, but luckily I was able to wake up on time. To be honest, I was scared at first that I would wake up late and miss the flight. With all the news about plane crashes at the time, I was also scared

something might happen, especially when the lights were flickering on the plane. But I remained calm, and it was a good flight the whole time. This was my first time traveling with a lot of new people. I had traveled with people who weren't my family but who I knew or was close to, and this time was different—I didn't know anyone.

I was excited to see what Chicago would be like since I had never been there before. I checked the weather a few days before the trip and expected to see it snowing. I was so excited for that since I had never seen snow falling—only

after it had already fallen when visiting Big Bear with my family in the winter. I imagined Chicago as a big city with tall buildings, like New York in certain parts. I also thought it would look fancy from the pictures I had seen. I couldn't wait to see what Chicago was really like, and I was writing this from the plane.

After arriving, I felt really excited that we finally made it. I wasn't prepared for how cold it would actually be when we first stepped out of the airport. It was really cold, and it was a new experience for me. I imagined tomorrow would be a big day, with the leadership conference taking place and the chance to learn many new things and meet people from different places in the U.S.

2nd day: At the end of the second day, I found the experience really interesting and fun. Today, I met university students from San Francisco and learned about what they studied and their reasons for attending the conference. I realized I wanted to study similar things. I shared my plans and goals with them, and I attended two workshops at the U.S. Hispanic Leadership Conference.

The first workshop provided information on how to connect with professionals and find jobs in our field of interest. The speaker even demonstrated a Chrome extension to help find

contacts that might not appear on a company's website. I felt somewhat connected to the speaker, though they were addressing a big group. I learned how to use the extension to find jobs in the future and make connections.

The second workshop was called "From Potential to Power: Mastering the Essentials of Extraordinary Leadership." It covered how to grow as a leader and the traits that make a great leader. I liked how we worked in groups, talked individually, and received feedback. I learned skills like building connections and having a strong voice, which I plan to apply in my daily life.

The most important moment today was meeting instructors and attending different workshops. My favorite moment was seeing snowfall in Chicago. It was so beautiful, and I loved the experience. My challenge for tomorrow is to meet more people and professionals to build connections.

3rd day: The third day in Chicago was even better. We had a great breakfast, and I met many new people from the group I traveled with. I attended two more workshops at the conference.

The first workshop was "Polished Presence: Mastering Table Etiquette for Personal & Professional Success." We learned

the correct way to use utensils at big events and practiced with real plates and utensils. I felt connected to the speaker, who answered questions and was very polite. I learned how to make a good impression at formal dinners and plan to use these skills at future events.



The second workshop was “Enterprise Design Thinking,” which taught us how to design things that accommodate different needs and avoid causing problems. I felt identified in this workshop because I spoke with the leader afterward, and they walked around asking if we needed help. I learned how to think creatively to solve

problems, which I plan to use in the future.

My favorite moment today was walking around Chicago, seeing the tall buildings, and visiting the biggest Starbucks with five floors. The most important thing I learned today was how to think critically and behave professionally at events.

My challenge for tomorrow is to return to Los Angeles—I will really miss Chicago and its beauty.

4th day: It's the day we return to Los Angeles. I'm happy to be going home to my warm, comfy house with my family, but I will also miss Chicago a lot. I enjoyed my time there. I experienced freezing cold weather and snowfall for the first time, and I loved it. I imagine my family will be happy to see me back. I have three younger siblings I called every night during the trip, and they always hug me when I return.

One of the most important things I learned from this trip is the lessons and speeches from the leadership conference. Many speakers said we should always take advantage of opportunities and keep striving for great things. I will especially remember how women speakers encouraged young women to stand up for themselves and not let anyone think of them as lesser. These lessons will stay with me for future challenges.

Bianca - Clouds, Courage, and Conference Days

After the plane takes off, I feel a mix of sleepiness, nervousness, and a sense of peace. I am sleepy due to the time of the flight as we had to wake up early. While we were taking off, I felt relaxed since it was very quiet and the lights were dim. Being up in the sky and seeing the view of the clouds at first was so nice because they looked so full and soft. I am also very happy because I got the window seat and can easily see the outside and the airplane wing. As of right now, there are really only a lot of clouds since it was sprinkling a bit. Hopefully, there will be better views throughout the flight. I'm very happy that we were able to take off without any delay since it had rained earlier and I heard there were possibilities of snow in Chicago. My ears are a bit stuffy and it does bother me from time to time, but I forgot to bring or buy gum. As we were taking off, there were certain times my stomach felt funny because of the feeling of going up or slightly going down due to turbulence, but other than those bumpy feelings, it was a smooth ride. During the turbulence, it feels like you are on a roller coaster and you get those sharp turns or drops. They were both unexpected and uncomfortable for my stomach.

Currently, with all the news going around about flights crashing, it has become my main fear. The strong turbulence, the shaking of the plane, and sometimes the flickering of the lights only added to this growing fear. However, after writing this, I am going to try to take a nice nap and hope I wake up to the beauties and maybe snow of Chicago. I'm also scared something will go missing or my carry-on will get ruined. They took some of our carry-ons into the bottom of the plane due to a limit of space in the head bins.



This is not my first time traveling; it is actually my fourth time. My first time traveling was to Mexico for my grandparents' 50-year wedding renewal. I was about 11 years old when my parents

sent me to Mexico. My sister had gone alone the previous year for my uncle's wedding and enjoyed her time with all our aunts and cousins. They wanted me to be able to both

meet my relatives in Mexico and also get a sense of where they grew up. I have also traveled to Washington and New York during the summer as an “end of middle school graduation trip” that had been postponed due to COVID. It was more of an informational trip as we went to memorials, museums, and historical locations. My most recent flight was going back to Mexico with one of my other sisters as she went to visit for the first time, and I was on summer break during my sophomore year.

This is not my first time traveling with people who are not my family, as the time I went to Washington and New York I went with other students, some students' parents, and teacher chaperones. I was gone for a whole week and spent three days in Washington and three days in New York. This is my second time traveling without family and I would say it is almost about the same distance. For this reason, I am not that scared of being homesick or getting scared of being alone. Especially since I know more people on this trip than the other one. On the trip to Washington, I only knew a few chaperones and one other student who was in the same grade as me. Since our trip had been postponed, we ended up going with the incoming high school freshmen. Me and my other friend were the only rising sophomores at the time.



I imagine Chicago will be very cold and I hope it will be snowing or at least some snow to play with. Students that went last year have told me to prepare for the wind and the fact that it will be pretty cold. They recommended that I double up in order to stay warm. For some reason, when I think of Chicago, I think of something similar to

New York, with high structures, very modern buildings, and very packed with lots of people.

First Day/Night: I am currently feeling very sleepy since as soon as we got off the plane, we went into a van straight to the hotel. We set down our things and went to go out and eat as well as register for the conference. Maybe it's because I felt the wind constantly pushing me back, but walking around even though it felt like a short distance had me tired by the end of today. Also, a bit of a side note, but Chicago winter made me realize that I shiver in LA for no reason because the cold over there does not compare to the cold here. We stepped out of the airport and breathing through our nose and mouth created condensation or the white fog. It made

me instantly regret not taking a scarf. I am so excited to be in Chicago and to be able to see the snow on the sidewalks. It actually feels like I went back in time and it's Christmas again as they have the Christmas lights up on the trees and the snow in a lot of places. I hope it snows tomorrow and that the conference is very entertaining and informative.

I imagine tomorrow will be hectic and productive because we might still be jet lagged and the time difference might affect some of us, but attending the conference must go on. I imagine that tomorrow will be a fun experience and I will be able to talk to new people. I hope to experience my first snowy day in Chicago tomorrow. Since this is my first time going to a major conference like this one, I don't know what to expect and am a bit nervous. I imagine that the conference will take place in the same room and there will be a rotation of panelists. I imagine that some very important people will be there and we will be able to take pictures and network with them. My expectations for tomorrow are to have a good day, not be as tired, and have good food. I hope to learn something new from the panelists and make fun memories. I also expect there to be a lot of people and hopefully I'll be able to talk to someone who is from a different state. Maybe we can visit some monuments like the Bean and be able to get some cute little souvenirs to take home. I also expect to be walking in the snow and hopefully

not freezing to death.

If I could bring anybody with me, I would want to bring my sisters so they can see the buildings and the snow. I would also like to have my parents here, but I feel like they would get a bit bored after a few days because we might be seeing the same places. They have always taken me and shown me new places when growing up, so I would love to have them be here to experience Chicago with me. They are also very open to new things and I have always had fun goofy moments with them. We would also be able to experience the hard winds together and take nice pictures. We would also probably go to more destinations as they like to fully take in new experiences.

Day2: To start off, we had a mandatory high school empowerment workshop led by Ovi Vasquez. I do partially feel connected to Ovi Vasquez because we come from similar backgrounds as we both have Hispanic parents and have had struggles we have both overcome. However, during his lecture I did feel disconnected from him as I felt his attention was more on the guys than the girls. I did enjoy that it was interactive and he did make me chuckle a few times with his jokes. The main idea of his lecture was to never give up and to never underestimate your worth. He also slightly brushed over work visas and how he has one.

He heavily encouraged us as students to network online by calling people in power and asking for their time to answer questions we have. He stated the worst they can say is “NO,” but it is very unlikely as people tend to care for students and the youth. I learned that there are Chrome extensions that can get you important information that you might not find or have a difficult time finding, such as a number or email from someone in power or someone who works in a company you're interested in. I learned that I have to put myself first and start making those connections and calls. I also have to be able to accept that people will probably decline, but you just have to move on to the next number.

After attending Ovi’s workshop, we decided to go around and look at the other workshops, but while we walked around, many of them had already closed due to being full. We settled on a workshop called "From Potential to Power:



Mastering the Essentials of Extraordinary Leadership" presented by Romona Houston, a social impact



strategist. By that time, and with the time difference, I was starting to doze off a little during the workshop. However, I do recall that it went over what makes a club, organization, and leaders work the best.

This included things like collaboration, communication, networking, and setbacks. The way she was teaching the lecture made me feel very included because she allowed for us, the audience, to jump in and explain things through our personal experience. I felt connected because many of the students talked about what their main goal in life was. Many said it was to help support their family because they have always been there. Although many students talked about their clubs that are trying to diversify their campus, I didn't feel left out because my personal club, although it might not be as diverse as a culture club, can also grow from what I learned in the conference.

The most important moment of the day was when we were at the Luncheon, not only because of the amazing delicious

food but because that is when the current holder of Miss USA, Alma Cooper, started speaking. Let me just say that when she was introduced as not only Miss USA but also as being part of the army and attending Stanford, I was shocked and amazed. I was fangirling, to say the least. She gave an amazing empowering speech to all the girls.

My favorite moment of the day was trying Chicago-style pizza and then going out and experiencing a small snowstorm. Like you've probably read before, I have been wanting it to snow very badly, so walking in the snow was very exciting, especially because I was fully covered and warm. I was looking forward to the Chicago-style pizza because everyone was telling me how delicious it was, and they were not wrong—it was very cheesy and tasty.

I wasn't able to take advantage of the Career and Graduate School Recruitment Fair because it was only during the time I had the first mandatory lecture with Ovi. I plan to talk to more people and hopefully continue to wake up early, as well as try not to doze off during lectures.

Day3: Today we started by taking a workshop called "Polished Presence: Mastering Table Etiquette for Personal and Professional Success." Me and the other girls decided that we would need this for dinner later in the night. We

thought if we took it right now, we could practice and polish what we learned for the luncheon and be set for dinner. We went over the setup for dinner, such as what forks and knives to use first. She told us that she decided to push for this workshop because many of her students were scared coming into the hall and the tables fully set up and them not knowing what to do and if they were doing it correctly. I can connect to this because going into the hall and eating breakfast the first day, I was scared I wouldn't look proper and mess something up or be disrespectful in some way. I learned how to properly place my utensils whether eating a salad or the main dish. I can use this when I attend banquets, work dinners, or scholarship dinners in the future. After this, we went to the luncheon and practiced our etiquette. In a professional way, it felt like a tea party.

We had to go find another workshop that we all found interesting and that wasn't full and could fit all of us. We decided to go to a workshop called Intellectual Design.

CHAPTER 5: The Power of Resilience

Chicuei - Overcoming challenges and finding strength in adversity



My education has always been very different and unconventional. I was homeschooled, specifically in a style called “unschooling,” which focused on a more hands-on and critical approach. This was within

a very proud Purépecha, Caxcan, and Anahuac home. I was taught by books, by mentors, by teachers, and by my community. With this came independence and a deep love of freedom—something many don’t get to experience in a city like Los Angeles or even in the countryside. But with this also came a cost: my education was very isolated because of this disconnect and often incompatible (though, in my opinion, superior). But incompatible nonetheless.

Coming into school, I was told to do things in a robotic and conformist way, not in a critically thinking manner. I came

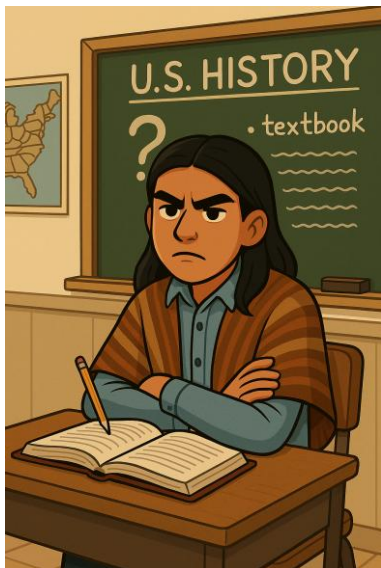
from reading books like *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which spoke about teaching and learning through a critical lens, and *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, which encouraged questioning everything. These books taught me that education is about learning, and to truly learn, you must ask, Why are things the way they are? But this was not my experience in the public education system.

After 14 years of hands-on field trips, college lectures, self-study, community organizing, and workshops, suddenly sitting in an institution that lacked the same level of freedom was difficult. It was different, and it was a major obstacle to overcome. It felt very much like I was being chained down and held back by the institution—and in many ways, it still does.

This isn't to say I don't value education or see it as important. It is valuable and useful. I believe university will be more aligned with my learning style because it focuses on what I want to study. It will allow me to reach my life goals and my aspirations for my community.

Higher education will offer a more freeing and stimulating academic experience. Universities have resources and professors who can teach anthropology in a way that is more useful and relevant to me. I hope to stay in academia and

become a professor one day. Attending university seminars has been a normal part of my life—I have been going to lectures and symposiums on Mesoamerica and Zapatismo since I was young. My family would either attend or facilitate these seminars, making them a core part of my homeschooled education. Going to college will also support my goal of creating my own *calmecac* (a Mesoamerican school) for my community, where they can learn about themselves and their history.



As I entered high school, I often felt intellectually inferior—not because I lacked knowledge, but because teachers and staff treated me that way. That is how the system is set up. However, there were people in my corner—those who supported me, who fought for me, and who encouraged my political and cultural work. That

helped a lot. The teachers who gave me room to grow and think freely, rather than forcing me to conform, were the ones who truly stimulated my mind. That was when I felt truly

educated instead of mentally restricted and, at times, even enslaved.

For example, in my AP U.S. History class, I frequently argued with the teacher because the textbooks were overly simplistic and lacked nuance. They did not mention the Iroquois influence on the American Revolution and the creation of the Senate and government structure. They did not discuss the importance of property and how it shaped American history. They did not acknowledge the Banana Wars or the significance of American imperialism in the 1800s. But I did. I spoke about these things, and I was told I was wrong, that it wouldn't be on the test, or that what I was saying was irrelevant—even though history is not just a series of facts, but a complex web of interconnected events and influences.

This was just one class, for one semester, over a few months. But I have always had at least one class like this—often multiple in a single year. And this has been an ongoing challenge. There has been no room for dialogue or deeper discussion. Instead, I was repeatedly told to stay quiet and do as I was told. This was completely different from my previous education. I was raised and taught to ask why and to question everything—to understand topics from the

bottom up, in every aspect. But that has not been my experience in the public school system.

Bryan - The Strength in Vulnerability



Challenges and failures are an inevitable part of life. I have faced many, but one of the most impactful was struggling with a difficult state of mind. I experienced overwhelming emotions—sadness, anxiety, fear, and confusion. However, instead of acknowledging them, I ignored them. I had always seen myself as a

positive person, so it was unsettling to feel this way.

The build-up of these emotions was caused by a series of negative events: baseball was not going well, I lost motivation, I went through a deeply personal breakup, and I started viewing the world differently. However, this period of

struggle taught me an essential life lesson: I must learn to express my emotions.

Whenever someone checked on me, I would force a smile and say I was fine, even when I was not. I believed that keeping my emotions bottled up was the best approach, but I was wrong. Suppressing them only made things worse.

Thankfully, I had an amazing teacher and a supportive friend who helped me through this difficult time. My teacher noticed my change in attitude and constantly checked in on me. I am grateful she did not give up on me. When I finally opened up to her, I released the emotions I had been holding inside, making them feel lighter. I also had a friend who provided a safe space for me to express myself, reminding me that people cared.

If someone is going through a similar battle, I urge them to talk to a trusted person as soon as possible. Do not let negative emotions consume you. The worst thing you can do is believe you can handle everything alone—eventually, those emotions will overpower you.

This experience has also changed how I interact with others. Now, I make an effort to check on those around me. A simple question or a small compliment can make a huge

difference. We never truly know what someone is going through, and showing that we care might be exactly what they need.

A healthy state of mind is something I want for everyone. I hope that by spreading this awareness, more people can live life to the fullest, free from the weight of unspoken struggles.

Dayanne - Learning to Prioritize



The biggest challenge I've faced would have to be when I had to deal with having more than two clubs and extracurricular activities at a time. I was taking three extra programs—CyberPatriot, Driver's Ed, and Journalism—along with an extra 0-period course for Choir. At the beginning of the second semester of my

senior year, I had to manage four classes. Now it's just three.

I was never really one to sing out loud, let alone be in front of people. I knew it would be best for me to leave since I couldn't keep up with the sudden changes in schedule that interfered with my own.

Although I appreciated my time in Choir, I had to say my goodbyes and move on. I learned I can't put too much pressure on myself. I needed to organize my time and prioritize my well-being for the sake of my sanity and the management of my other courses.

Breaking away from Choir helped me understand what is best for myself. There are times when unplanned things happen that absolutely irritate me. It feels stressful for people like me who work based on plans and dates. When things aren't organized, I get anxious that things won't go right. This is what being in Choir while managing three clubs felt like. Choir was so unorganized because it was brand new for the teacher. It wasn't his fault, but I learned I can't overstuff my plate. I need to be in charge of standing up for myself when I feel overwhelmed.

I'm not much of a people person until I meet the right people. There are some people, like my partner, who help me when I'm down and not feeling my best. They make me feel heard

and appreciated. In difficult times, they allow me the space to let my feelings out and follow with comfort.

George - From Silence to Strength

The biggest challenge I have ever faced was my social anxiety. For years, I felt trapped in a box, too afraid to speak my thoughts. I avoided sharing ideas in class, speaking in groups, and usually stayed silent out of fear of being judged. Over time, I realized that my silence was holding me back. I wasn't where I wanted to be in life. I wasn't satisfied with who I was. I wanted to be better.



I started challenging myself by answering one question in class, then slowly joining conversations. Though that fear didn't disappear overnight, those little steps helped me overcome this bad

habit and eventually build confidence. I learned that my voice mattered and that, to grow, all you need is to start by stepping outside of your comfort zone.

Overcoming social anxiety shaped me into a more confident and empathetic person. It taught me the importance of listening, understanding other people's perspectives, and just pushing past fear to grow. As a leader, I encourage others to speak up, trying to get their input, knowing how difficult it can be. I try to lead with patience and make sure everyone feels heard—how I wished I would've had a leader back then who could've included me more, someone who cared about my thoughts. My experience has shown me that true leadership isn't about being the loudest or most confident in the room; it's about creating an environment where everyone can have a voice.

One role that played a huge part during my difficult times was my dad. He has always been the sole provider for this family, and he's always been a hardworking and determined person. I've always looked up to his perseverance. Watching him push through challenges, having kids at 18, made me realize that if I wanted to achieve my own goals, if I wanted to be the best version of myself and prove to him that his efforts weren't pointless—that his kid is actually going

places—I couldn't let social anxiety hold me back. I knew that being successful required confidence, communication, and leadership qualities. I couldn't develop any of this if I stayed silent. Because of this, I pushed myself to speak up, engage more, and break free from that box.

For me, staying motivated when things don't go as planned comes from remembering why I strive to become a leader in the first place. Whenever there are setbacks, I remind myself of my long-term goals and just how much I've been through over the years. I use those memories to say I can get through anything. I also ask myself, would my dad give up? Would he just stop trying? That also pushes me to improve. I've learned that success is not about never failing; it's about overcoming and learning from failure.

I would tell others that overcoming social anxiety takes time, but every step counts—small or big. Don't be afraid to start small: answer one question in class, join a conversation, or just talk with a friend. It's okay to feel uncomfortable and weird at first, but growth happens only if you reach outside your comfort zone. Also, remember that your voice matters, and most of your worries are just in your head—people aren't that focused on anyone. Stay patient with yourself and keep pushing forward. Confidence builds with practice, and

the more you practice, the more you will become the person you want to be.



Justina - The Power of Resilience

One of the biggest challenges that I have faced has been with myself—becoming more confident in putting myself out



into the world. For a long time, I had a hard time taking on leadership roles or becoming comfortable talking to new people. I wasn't confident and had always been pretty shy. But when I got to high school, I was able to meet some good friends who taught me and encouraged me to

take on leadership roles and become more confident. It took time, but now as a senior, I feel much more confident in myself and my ability to communicate with others.

I now do public speaking and have helped advocate for people's rights in my community. I have also become the secretary of my school's Law and Public Service LEADS

club. This journey has helped shape me into the kind of person I once thought I could never become. I am now a stronger leader—someone who can guide others and advocate as a student. It has made me more outgoing and helped me connect with a variety of people, which has opened doors to opportunities to travel across California and the U.S.

My friends and family have played a big role in helping me become more outgoing and confident during high school. They encouraged me to join different programs and organizations where I could meet new people and experience new things. I have had the opportunity to visit several universities, which broadened my view of what's available to me and what kind of future I can build. My parents also gave me the encouragement I needed. They would push me to do things I was hesitant about—things I now recognize were helpful. Even when I got my first job, it was because of their encouragement that I went through with it and gained experience. My friends helped me feel more confident in school, especially when speaking with teachers or staff. I'm forever thankful to those who helped me grow into a better version of myself.

Bianca - Balancing Fear and Hope - A Senior's Journey



Currently, something I have been challenging is the fear of going off to college and growing up. I'm scared about university acceptances and rejections—what university I will attend, how far I will be from my family, and if I leave far, what I'll be missing out on. I am scared that working myself so hard will not

have been worth it and I might make the wrong choices and disappoint many people. It's quite funny because, although I'm scared to venture really far, I hope the universities on the East Coast are interested in me. During this time, it also makes me realize how fast time has passed. Not only does it feel like I started my senior year less than a month ago, but overall, I still sometimes feel like my freshman year hasn't ended. I am getting closer and closer to the wish I once had as a kid of being older and an adult. But now I realize that

the closer I am to being an adult, the closer I am to needing to pay taxes and be fully independent. Scary, to say the least. Although I haven't fully overcome this, one way I like to put this fear away is by spending more time with family and remembering that what is meant for me will come to me. I have to have more faith and stop stressing myself out. I am also trying to enjoy the rest of the year by making and doing things I wouldn't naturally do.

My advice to anyone going through a similar situation (mostly any rising senior) would be to have faith in themselves and stop stressing over it, and focus on the people around them. Of course, if needed, check on status and if the universities require anything. I would tell them, like I was also told, that senior year passes by really quickly and



to make sure to enjoy it to the fullest. It is okay to reach out to people because they might also be going through similar things. And like I was once told at a camp: “Live, Laugh, Love.”

Everyone around me—from my parents, siblings, friends, and mentors—has always made sure to check up on me and make sure that I am okay. They are always there when they notice I'm not okay, making sure I take breaks and have days to rest and enjoy myself by going out. My family has also supported me with any decision I make and is always there to advise me when I am at my worst. They have supported me by joining me for a run or walk, enjoying meals together, and helping me focus on homework. My friends always try to make outings or gatherings so we can all take a break from school and have time to catch up with each other. We have each been rocks of support to one another.

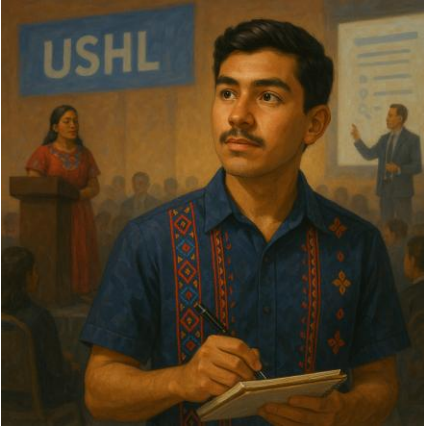
Whenever there is a setback or things don't go as planned, I remind myself that it's probably for the best and that something better will come my way. In other words, I like to think that things happen for a reason. My sister once told me this when I got rejected from a program I really wanted to get into. And although at the moment I was very hurt and couldn't fully accept it, it came true in the end. I found a better program where I made many memories and had a more flexible schedule.

I always feel completely overwhelmed during finals because I am a perfectionist and have gotten used to myself always

getting A's. For this reason, I always put so much pressure on myself to either pick up grades if needed or just make sure I pass the final. It is especially hard in the fall because that is when most of my clubs are the most active, like College Track, Mock Trial, SRLA, LPS LEADS, Breakfast Club, ASB, etc. So, having to juggle my participation within the club as well as my grades and personal life can be very challenging and overwhelming. I sometimes find myself not being able to go out with friends and messing up my sleep schedule and sleeping extremely late.

CHAPTER 6: Reflecting on the Conference

Bryan - Unlocking Connections and Cultural Roots



There were many takeaways from the amazing USHLI conference, but the most notable was learning how to effectively network and understanding the importance of staying connected with your culture.

Networking is essential in anyone's career. It allows a person to explore and learn more about the career they want to pursue. The experiences and advice received from a support network enable one to take a step forward in their career.

Ovi Velasquez taught me and the other participants how to email a person or find contact information using different websites like LinkedIn, Chrome extensions, LeadLeaper, and FindThatLead. He advised us to keep trying until we get the information we're looking for. Rejection is redirection. Rejection is not a sign to give up, but a hint to find a new route and discover answers elsewhere.

Furthermore, culture is extremely important because it connects to how one identifies themselves. Staying connected with your culture is vital—it allows you to stay connected with your roots and ancestors. Ms. Martha Villegas taught me this. Before this, I was unaware of how important being connected to my culture was. I was aware of it, but I wasn't connected to it. I always neglected it because I didn't realize its significance. Martha emphasized that knowing your culture helps you understand who you are and where you come from. She said we should always depend on our ancestors, pray to them whenever we need extra strength, and remember their sacrifices to improve our own lives.

Their insights stood out and resonated with us because they shared them with compassion and courage. Ovi shared how he didn't live in the best circumstances and faced challenges when he first arrived in the U.S., including language barriers and being stopped by police. Despite this, he showed resilience and continued pursuing his goals.

Martha didn't share her own stories but recounted her parents' sacrifices for her to have a better life. They left behind their home and loved ones, risking never seeing them again. Her parents were her biggest supporters and

never doubted her abilities. Hearing about her parents' sacrifices impacted me deeply because, too often, we don't acknowledge that our parents' efforts are the foundation of our success.

If I could share one message with the youth who couldn't attend, it would be this: always consider the advice people give you. Their advice can be life-changing, helping you grow and guiding you toward success. Never ignore advice—it might be the next step toward your goals. This was an unforgettable and surreal experience I'll never forget. I'll pass on the advice I received to others, hoping they'll do the same.

George - Inspiration from the Voices of Many



While in Chicago, I heard many stories from many people. I look up to so many of them, especially because they're just like me—a person with a Latino background. I was so encouraged by their backgrounds and courage; I

was amazed by how much they had overcome. These conferences truly motivated me to try to be the best version of myself. I truly believe in the person I can become, and I have no doubt I can do anything.

I couldn't be happier about going on this trip. I really flipped a switch. I feel like this really changed my mindset and who I can become now. If anyone is reading this and has the opportunity to attend the Chicago conference, please do so. I believe it is truly life-changing. I believe going to this conference set me on a new path. I couldn't be more grateful. You would learn so much and get so much advice from so many people.

Justina - Voices That Ignite Courage



The most valuable thing I learned from a speaker at the conference was that we should never let anyone bring us down

because of who we are or what we look like. They reminded us that we have the power to dream and become anything we want. Just because we belong to a certain race or background doesn't mean we should give up—if anything, it means we should lead. We should motivate others, reach for our dreams, and help others do the same.

Everyone has a dream, big or small, and everyone can achieve it as long as they try and put in the effort. Obstacles will come, but we shouldn't let them stop us. On the other side of those challenges, there is always something greater waiting as a reward for our hard work. Achieving our goals will make us feel proud and fulfilled.

The speaker's personal story and inspirational words deeply motivated me. I listened closely, and the way she spoke—with a strong, clear voice—captured everyone's attention. People stood up and applauded when she finished because her words resonated with us. She used powerful vocabulary like "courage," "confidence," and "perseverance," and explained them in ways that encouraged us to believe in ourselves.

I plan to apply her advice in many aspects of my life. I want to use her confident tone when speaking to professionals or sharing ideas. Whether proposing an idea at work or

participating in important discussions, I will make sure to speak clearly and assertively. As a woman, I know that our voices are not always heard—but they should be. Everyone deserves to be heard.

I will also carry her message about not giving up on my dreams. The career path I've chosen will have its challenges, whether in college or the professional world. But I won't let struggles define me. I'll keep fighting for what I love, and I know that the reward will be worth it.

To the youth who didn't attend the conference, I would say: take the words and advice I've shared and let them inspire you. They're helping me—and I hope they can help you too. I also encourage you to attend a conference like the Hispanic Leadership Conference, where you can learn from professionals and start building connections that will benefit you for years to come.

CHAPTER 7: Building a Purposeful Future.

Bryan - Investing in Dreams and Giving Back



If I were given the blessing of receiving \$5,000, I would use it wisely to get the most out of it. First, I'd invest it strategically in stocks to increase the amount. I wouldn't tell my parents because I believe they might spend it quickly on unnecessary items like a new car, more clothes, or household goods. While

these aren't the worst purchases, they're unnecessary since we already have perfectly fine cars, clothes, and household items.

After some time, I'd use the money for educational essentials—like a computer, books, a backpack, and pencils. This would help me and relieve some financial stress from my parents, allowing them to focus on my siblings or

themselves. I'd also set aside money for future college expenses in case unexpected events occur.

If any money is left, I'd spend it on my family, buying items they want. If more remains, I'd finally spend some on myself and buy a few things I've been wanting, like new technology.

If I used the money to improve my community, I'd donate it to a helpful nonprofit organization. I've always been upset that some young kids with bright futures leave the earth too soon because they can't afford treatments for illnesses. I'd donate the \$5,000 to Save the Children, which gives 85% of every dollar to support children with supplies, medical care, and protection from dangerous situations. This would allow children around the world to receive the care they need and have a chance at a long, healthy life.

In the future, I aspire to create a well-established hydration drink business. Growing up surrounded by sports, I've always wanted to create something to enhance athletes' performance. I want to develop a healthy, well-rounded hydration drink to improve athletic ability. Unlike Gatorade, Powerade, or BodyArmor, which often contain too much sugar, salt, coloring, and other unhealthy ingredients, my drinks would focus on replenishing vitamins and minerals necessary for physical activity.



I've thought of flavors like watermelon, strawberry, blueberry, raspberry, and mango. I'll aim to make them as healthy and delicious as possible, with strong yet not overwhelming flavors. This project won't be easy and will require many steps. First, I'll graduate from college with a business

degree to learn how to run a business effectively and efficiently. Then, I'll need to raise enough money to start the business and build a trustworthy and dependable team. With that, I'll be able to make my dreams a reality.

George - Investing in My Future and Giving Back

If I had \$5,000 right now, I would buy a car—or at least make a down payment for one. The reason this is my top choice is that my dream college is Cal Poly Pomona, and that's quite a drive from here. I don't plan on dorming, so I'll need a car to commute. It would also help with everything else, like getting groceries for my house. It's just me, my grandma,



and my grandpa, and they're both too old to be grocery shopping, walking all the way to the store and carrying packs of water. So that's another reason why it's such a big deal for me.

How I would use the \$5,000 to support and improve my family's situation is by making sure to bring groceries and

whatever my grandparents may need—whether it's clothes, food, or things to make their lives easier. I would also use the money to try and make more money to make life easier for me and my family.

And if I were to use the \$5,000 for the community, I would give it to food banks or possibly try to organize street cleanups. I think I would mainly focus on youth groups. They are really my priority. I would use this money to support organizations that help the youth.

Justina - Building a Purposeful Future



If I had \$5,000 right now, I would stretch that money as far as I could to achieve a few meaningful goals. First, I would invest in opening my own business: a café. I would use part of the money to lease a space and buy the equipment and supplies to get started. Owning a café has always been a dream of mine, especially because I'm

passionate about baking and making coffee. These activities bring me peace and happiness. Being able to do what I love while making others happy would be an incredible experience.

My inspiration for owning a business comes from my parents. My mom once had a small business making marshmallow decorations for parties, but she stopped due to family responsibilities. I would love to help her restart that dream. My dad still owns a business manufacturing bouncy castles and running a small shop that sells snacks and party supplies. Watching both of them work hard to maintain their

businesses inspired me to do the same, but with something that brings me joy.

Aside from opening a café, I would love to travel, especially to parts of Asia. The top three places on my list are Thailand, Japan, and South Korea. I've been captivated by the cultures in these countries. In Japan, I'd love to see the cherry blossoms; in South Korea, I want to visit Seoul Tower and try the amazing food I've seen online; and in Thailand, I hope to explore the beautiful temples and connect with the locals. Traveling would help me grow as a person and see



more of the world, something that truly excites me. Although it can be expensive, I'd try to travel when tickets are more affordable and budget wisely.

Lastly, I would use the money to support my family. I know I can't contribute much right now, but if I had the

\$5,000, I would help with groceries, household needs, and treat my parents to things they love. Despite financial struggles, they've always tried to give me the little things I enjoy, like my favorite snacks. I want to return that kindness.

Even if \$5,000 isn't enough to do it all, I'm committed to working hard to earn whatever extra is needed. As my parents always say, "Money doesn't come easy—you have to work hard for it."

Bianca - The Dilemma of Dreams and Responsibility



Reading this, I have two thoughts: use the money responsibly and put it to good use, or use the money

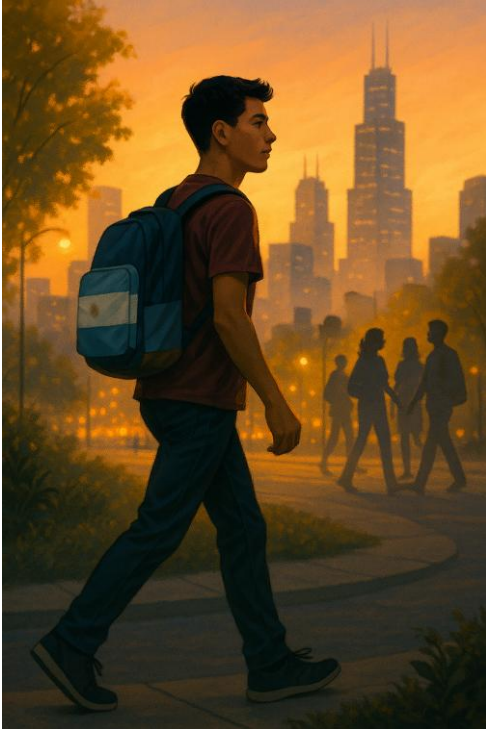
because you only live once and it's good to take a break from time to time. My first thought would be to save it and use it wisely. By this, I mean use it when I go to college for books, transportation, and, if needed, to pay off some of my tuition. I have also recently learned at one of my programs, College Track, about the 50%, 30%, and 20% rule. The rule is where you use 50 percent of your money, or more often your income, towards needs; 30 percent would go to things you want; and 20 percent would go towards savings or savings accounts. I would like to be responsible and use \$2,500 of the money towards these needs.



I would also like to spend it all on a nice trip somewhere abroad, like Korea or Japan, since the culture and scenery are very beautiful and they have many snacks and foods I would like to try.

CHAPTER 8 - JC talks about leadership

Bryan: Chicago—A Journey of Growth and Giving Back



I am extremely grateful I was able to participate in this amazing Chicago trip. It's an experience I won't take for granted, knowing many others around the world don't have this opportunity. Chicago will forever stay with me—whether through the memories I made or the wisdom I gained.

This trip benefited me greatly by teaching me how to be a great leader, network effectively, become civically engaged, and much more. A great leader is an effective communicator, emotionally intelligent, open-minded, and encouraging rather than hostile. Networking takes courage—it's about continuing to contact people even when they reject or ignore you.

Rejection is redirection. Persistence is key to building a supportive network.

Being civically engaged is important because current policies, such as those of former President Donald Trump, are affecting my community, the Hispanic community. His efforts to limit our progress and spread fear hold us back. Raising awareness of these issues gives me the opportunity to inform Hispanic communities and inspire them to act. Hopefully, we'll all build the courage to resist unjust motives.

Many influential speakers and advocates at the conference shared their wisdom with me, hoping I would use it to not only succeed but also pass it on to others. The spread of knowledge uplifts communities—the more you learn, the more you can accomplish.

How will I continue spreading knowledge and positively impacting others? By sharing what I learned. Teaching others how to network with tools like LeadLeaper or FindThatLead can help them take steps toward their goals. Connections and mentorship broaden one's understanding of career options and open doors to hands-on experiences.

I can also emphasize the importance of persistence. When things seem hopeless and full of failure, remember that

consistency leads to success. One attempt will eventually bring the desired result.

This is my way of paying it forward. Although others didn't attend the USHLI Conference, sharing what I learned helps



them feel part of the experience. In the future, as a successful business owner, I plan to create a foundation that offers opportunities to local Boyle Heights students. I want to give them the chance to visit colleges and educational events to inspire and encourage them to continue their education.

When they complete the program, I'll remind them of the importance of paying it forward—not just to show kindness but to open doors for future participants. The more

accessible the program is for Boyle Heights students, the greater the impact on the community. Wisdom must be shared selflessly—knowledge is key to advancement.

