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OUR POTENTIAL

2021-2022



A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS FROM
AGGIE FIRST SCHOLARS
VOL. 2

EDITED BY ASHLEY WELLS &
CHARITY MAEDA VAN DEN AKKER



Foreword

From Madeline "Maddie" Evans,
AFS Student Coordinator, 2020-2022

The personal journey that each human being embarks on is unique to that individual. Many will have experiences, privileges, and hardships influenced by the actions and choices of others. While what transpires in the life of each individual cannot solely be determined by the individual, the power to know the potential within lies in each one of us. Imagine a world where your best self was seen. Where the bruises and scars of the past were not your defining factors, but rather, stand as testaments of who you have become and who you are becoming. This experience has become a reality for me.

I have been privileged as a first-generation college student at USU to have had the opportunity to be surrounded by fellow first-generation Aggie's who inspire me daily with the potential that I have come to see and know within each of them. It is through their courageous examples, tenacious advocacy, and relentless determination that has allowed me to come to know the potential within myself. As you too are given the opportunity to hear and learn from their inspiring stories that lie on the following pages, I hope that you will take the time to come to know the potential within. The potential that is just itching underneath the surface to be noticed and allowed to be seen.

Our potential is seen here, and
our potential is made known.

01

The Hero's Journey: Our Heroes

Our first-generation college students overcome challenges and struggles to get to where they are. To celebrate their hard work, courage, and achievements, students reflect on their path to USU and their own “hero’s journey.”

A traditional hero’s journey includes hallmarks like a call to adventure, meeting their mentor, and crossing the threshold. On their journey, heroes are tested but eventually come out on top, much like our first-generation college students.

Danise Gasio

It's Okay to not be Okay

The sun rose as it normally did passing the peak of the mountains. The ray of light leaked through the little girl's window creeping up to meet her eyes waking her from the night's rest. She arose happily and went about her day getting ready for school and such. There's nothing really special about the happy little girl. She comes from a very large family of which she is the youngest of the children. Both of her parents work though different hours of the day, always making sure that at least one is home by the time the children come from school.

Her family is of average status and they have all that is needed in order to survive and be well off. Her family is very loving and without fail will always say "I love you" as a farewell after every conversation. The little girl has all that is needed in her life, nothing more nothing less. One day however, the girl finds herself sitting alone in her bedroom, doing nothing but thinking.

At school she had to deal with her classmates making jokes of which she was the punchline. She smiled and laughed with them though was confused as to why they chose to use her. After school she had come home to a very furious mother who had been informed that the girl wasn't doing well in school. Her mother yelled at the girl giving little to no room for the child to speak for herself, when the girl did her mother saw it as a sign of disobedience and proceeded to discipline her. Soon after the interaction with her mother the child sits at the dining room table struggling to do her homework. She asks one of her siblings for help, though when it is clear that the girl still isn't understanding, in frustration her sibling yells that she must do it herself.

This day was no different from her others. Some are better but overall her routine follows about the same way, though this one has the child sitting in her room, with no one and nothing but her thoughts. These thoughts were strange to her. All her life she had never felt or thought anything like this. The little girl was known in her family as always being the happy one, the one that always saw the good in people and situations, the one with the loudest laugh and the biggest smile. Overall she was a ray of sunshine. The thoughts that invaded her head that night were far from that. These feelings and thoughts were similar to sadness but at a very much greater level. The best way to describe the thoughts would be that it seemed to put the girl in a hole, of which it always seemed like it was impossible to get out of. It seemed to the girl that anytime she would attempt to leave the hole, it would get deeper, darker, to the point of which it felt like it was consuming her. The girl not knowing what to do but wanting to try and stop these thoughts decided that physical pain would help keep the mental pain away. Later that week the girl's older sister saw the marks left from the nights before and had asked about them.

The little girl confided to her older sister about the thoughts that have started to appear in her head. The older sister looked at the little girl in disgust exclaiming that she had no reason to think such things! The older sister proclaims that they have a home, both parents, loving family, are healthy, and more. Out of all of these what would make the little girl think such horrible thoughts? When the brief talk with her sister had ended, the child was left with many questions. If I have so much, why do these thoughts make me feel like I have nothing? If I'm supposed to be happy to be with loving people in my life why do I feel nothing at all? So many questions yet it seemed that no one truly had an answer for any of them.

Because of this the girl decided to just keep everything to herself from now on. She wouldn't let many get close to her. She wouldn't let anyone know what was going on inside her head because frankly, she didn't know half of the time herself. She wouldn't let anyone see or even get close to the hole that a lot of the time consumes her and makes her sit there, feeding off her and making her feel cold and alone. Making it feel that whenever anything goes wrong in the girl's life it would always be her fault. As the little girl grew she got better at hiding the fact that she had these thoughts. She would laugh when appropriate, smile whenever needed, and overall did well to make sure people never felt the need to ask if there was anything wrong. Though with growing also comes wisdom.

In her high school years the young girl was assigned to write a speech on something that was bothering her. She didn't think much of it and wrote one about her thoughts that always made her feel lost in her own head. When trying to fix it up a bit she had to do some research, that soon led her to start to understand her situation a bit better. She got to watch other people talk about how they were going through similar problems or how because of these problems people did all kinds of things to make them go away. Now, the young girl did a good job at keeping people at a distance but, because of her speech someone was able to slip through the cracks.

His name was Matt and he had taken an interest in her speech because he saw that it could have potential. Matt helped her write and rewrite the speech a lot, making sure that every point would come across the way that she wanted it but also making sure that they could be backed with evidence. While they would write the speech though, Matt made her explain why she chose the points that she did. At the end of it all Matt had her recite to him the whole finished product. The young girl finished reciting and soon was embraced in a big hug from Matt. It caught the girl off guard and she didn't know what to do. She tried pushing away from Matt but he held her tight. They both stood there for a little while till Matt finally decided to let the young girl go. She stepped back and met Matt's eyes to find that they were wet from tears. Curious and confused she asked why he had been crying. His response was because these are things that are okay to feel but it seemed to him that others were trying to teach her differently. He explained that it's okay not to be okay and how her speech shows just that. The young girl didn't know how to respond but stood there on the verge of tears. That was the first time in her life that anyone had ever pointed out directly to her that not being okay doesn't always have to be a bad thing. Instead it shows that you're just going through something.

Now, because of Matt, the young girl feels a bit better about her late-night thoughts. She feels that a weight has been lifted from her shoulders because she doesn't always have to fear what others may think about her thoughts, actions, and feelings. Though she still does hide them, and will keep people at a distance, she's starting to slowly embrace that it's okay not to be okay. Even though some may say people need to always be happy, it's fine to turn to them and say that it's not logical. Yes she will still sometimes find herself in her hole of thoughts, and yes at times she feels that all her problems are her fault, but she also is able to at times smile a real smile and laugh a real laugh. It'll take time and there will always be more challenges but for now she's just going to focus on them one at a time.

Dulce Tena

The Perfect Daughter

Jennifer Reyes. The "perfect" daughter, sister, student and friend. Never complained, got good grades and was always there when you needed her. Labeled "rich" because her parents are strong Mexicans who want to give their kids the life they couldn't have. Being a senior in high school taking college courses took a toll on her, needing perfect grades to gain approval from her parents, to get into a good college and make her family proud. She's the type of person who puts others before herself but craves attention, but not the attention you think. From the outside many think, "Jennifer's got it all, her life is stress free and has her life planned to a T." But inside, Jennifer knows she wears a mask to hide what's really going on.

Being the oldest came with challenges, Jennifer would be the first to experience life before her brothers did. The first heartbreak, failure, disappointment. She felt all the pressures of the world coming down on her because she had a lot of people counting on her and supporting her. With a fake smile she pushes on, working harder, doing more. She doesn't know when to stop and take a break, she learned this from her mom. Never satisfied and felt the need to move on to the next thing. Jennifer knew there was something wrong, but what? The headaches, knots in her stomach, cloudy thoughts were coming all at once. She didn't know why she felt that way, the sense of numbness and zero satisfaction in doing anything she enjoyed previously. Again, being the oldest she didn't have anyone to talk to or to go to in order to get the help she needed. She pushed forward.

Burning out, no energy, continued. Jennifer knew how depressed she was but felt the need to keep it to herself instead of telling her parents because she didn't want them to worry. They had enough problems for themselves and thought she would save them the stress. Mental health in the latino community was non-existent, no one shares their feelings because everyone faces challenges and life struggles, it's the normal. Jennifer knew if she told her parents, they would think she was over exaggerating and weak, which was the last thing she wanted people to think of her. Jennifer attended an assembly covering mental health and solutions to problems. She cried at the thought of feeling depressed forever. She knew there were friends, parents, counselors and other people she could talk to but this would disturb the image she had created for herself. The common conversation starter, "How are you?" startled her. Many opportunities arose for her in the next several weeks for her to come clean about the weight on her shoulders. Time after time, she would shove it deeper, digging a hole so deep she lost herself.

However, there was one person in her life she felt comfortable being vulnerable with, her English teacher, Ms. Dub. Students disliked her because she had zero tolerance for attitude and rudeness, this was why she liked her. Jennifer would often leave class to go sit with her, would get gifts from her and would often talk about fun memories. Jennifer had the gut feeling telling her to confess to Ms. Dub since she was the closest she had at the moment of need. Three rooms away from her classroom, hand on the door handle, first step onto the blue carpet, the first look. There was a substitute teacher. "Exactly what I needed." Jennifer murmured. Tears filled her eyes as she walked out of the room, taking this as a sign to not seek help, that it was nothing and it was all in her head. Finally hitting rock bottom, feeling discouraged she went home and decided to write a letter to her future self. Journaling her day made her feel something, a sense of relief. She decided she would continue writing about her days and keep it in her backpack so it wouldn't be found by anyone.

Weeks passed. Nothing but the feeling of emptiness. It was the last hour of the day, and she headed to Ms. Dub's class. Ready for another day of English she prepared for 15 minutes of reading to begin. Ms. Dub reminded everyone of their reading logs and missing assignments. A normal day. Ms. Dub stood from her desk and walked over to the door excusing students and telling them to "have a good day!" Jennifer frowned at the sound of it, knowing this would be her life from now on. Walking towards the door Ms. Dub shut the door in front of her and held up a black notebook, Jennifer's notebook. The one she had used to drown with all of her pent-up depression. Fear struck Jennifer at the slight thought that Ms. Dub had opened it in order to find the owner. Ms. Dub stepped towards Jennifer and embraced her in a long hug. Jennifer, shocked and confused at first, knew why this was happening. She had read it, Jennifer cried, not at the fear of someone now knowing her secret, but from relief that someone now knew her secret. Ms. Dub promised to help Jennifer in any way she could, with the condition that Jennifer promised to try to receive the help.

Three months later. Jennifer learned that not being okay was okay. Acknowledging that she still had work to do on her mental health allowed her to be set free from a cage of perfection. Jennifer decided to not let her depression define her and instead use it to help others. She knew she wasn't the only one with this thunderstorm above her head, she helped friends, peers and even teachers relieve stress in healthy ways. Jennifer became an advocate for healthy mental health, knowing that some days would be darker than others she now knew how to better overcome the feeling and create a better way of living in order to be the best version of herself.

Petelo Tolua

The Hero and the Bandits

On April 17th, 1998 a hero was descended from the heavens. Throughout the years the hero spent his life slaving for the evil bandits. However, for the very first years of his life he was trained and raised by the mighty warriors of Samoa. The hero would spend his days with the warriors happily. The training consisted of racing, sparring, fighting, and defending his life.

The hero was stolen from the mighty warriors of Samoa. He was taken to a far off land. His days went from cheerful and happy to pain and agony. He was brutally beaten and attacked by the bandits. At the age of six he was so gruesomely beaten that he stayed at the lair for nights.

As he returned to training camp three nights and days later, the mentors were very shocked and appalled on how the hero survived this vicious attack. Years later the hero was still stuck in the lair with the bandits. Over the years he was threatened of his life and was beaten daily that the secrets he knew would stay in the circle. He tried to escape many times and was caught each time and was threatened to be killed.

The mighty warriors missed this hero dearly and went on a search to find him. When they finally found him they brought him a sage from the turtle and shark tribe. This sage brought him protection and knowledge. This tribe member took the hero away from the bandits. The hero entered a new world and was out of his comfort zone. He didn't know how to respond in his day-to-day life because he was scared of being beaten.

He was taken to the tribe turtle and shark and met new people. One was a counselor named Hartman. She taught the hero not to be afraid and that the good will always prevail. As the counselor spoke the hero received news of a new friend Tanya who would advocate for him. Not only was Tanya an advocate but his personal bodyguard.

As the hero's battle went on from hiding from the bandits the ending was near. He was close to his first goal which was escaping. After months of running the hero finally escapes the bandits for good. This was his greatest challenge yet.

The hero obtained freedom from the bandits, a life of love, and laughter. One of the members of the hero's new tribe was so loving and caring that he took the hero under his wing. He gained happiness and finally found the love he was looking for. His training was to become the best in all of the village. Mentors were rooting for him to succeed in life. The hero thought his friends and the neighboring tribes would be on their side. However, they found out the neighboring tribes weren't on his side but on the bandits side. This made the hero have severe trust issues in those around him.

The hero's final challenge was figuring out where he belonged, who he was, happiness, and to build trust in others. A few days later he met the most beautiful woman from the Sunshine tribe. She showed him what it was like to love and to be truly happy. She took him into her tribe and he learned so many new skills. He was able to feel loved and appreciated again. He now knows how to trust people. Even though he still doesn't trust many, he knows that this beautiful woman will always be on his side and stand up for him through his everyday struggles. He couldn't see life without her, so he then asked her to marry him and to make him the happiest hero in all the land.

They now are awaiting their wedding day and celebration of becoming/creating their own tribe. The hero was never alone throughout his journey, in a matter of fact, he was accompanied by his older sister and younger brother. The bond amongst the three has always been strong that nothing could sever it. Now they all live happily ever after and is very grateful to the mentors, the good people, and to the man who adopted the hero with his siblings.

Lydia Barrientos
The Hero's Journey

"The facts are, children will always turn into their parents," Teacher said, matter of factly. The little fox sighed as this thought penetrated her mind. She didn't want to be like her mother, who was always too tired and sad to leave the den, even in the beautiful spring mornings. The little fox didn't want to turn out like her father either, who was always exploding with anger and had run away years ago.

These thoughts were far too intrusive, and the little fox fell into a great sadness lasting many moons. She stayed in her nest, forgetting the rest of the forest. When the leaves started turning colors, the fox decided it was time to go back to school. Her old friends, the rabbit and the monkey, were far too busy with schoolwork to play with the little fox in this busy season. The fox didn't see any reason to finish her last year of schooling anymore and stayed home once more. This made her feel useless, as her siblings and father had both not finished school either. She pondered; is this the life I am to lead?

She didn't want to end her journey here, so young. The little fox had the whole forest to explore, she had barely been farther than the watering hole. With determination, she got herself together and made it to her school. Asking for help had never been her forte as she had always been as stubborn as her mother. She went up and asked the intimidating Madam Owl questions on graduating and what her next steps could be. Madam Owl ended up being a very kind and wise owl who helped the little fox finish school, even as it seemed to be an impossible task. Madam Owl also taught the little fox how to apply for college and how to fill out some crazy forms called the FAFSA.

After graduation, it was time for the little fox to go out into the forest alone. She waved goodbye to her family as she rode into a new part of the forest, a much crazier one. It took many, many moons of trying to find herself in this busy area, working hard and friendless. She realized that this wasn't the path she wanted to follow- what happened to college? The little fox had many skills and talents that she didn't know how to apply any other way, she was too comfortable like this.

One day, the little fox got word from her old friend, the rabbit. She found out that her mother had been kicked out of her den, along with her younger sister. They were bouncing around from friends' dens but it couldn't be permanent. The little fox reached out to her mother but she refused her help. It took the little fox many more moons to find a new den for her mother as she got everything ready. After her mother moved in, she realized that she needed her own den now. The forest was filled with new young animals ready to start their adventures in college who were all looking for their own dens so it was a busy market for awhile.

It almost seemed destined when she found her own little den near the college. The little fox thought, maybe this is what I am meant to do. Maybe it is time for college!

And so it was.

The little fox remembered to fill out the FAFSA and she got blessed with help to be able to go to college. Terrified, she waited for the first day to start. Her first class ended up helping her connect and start this new journey, and she realized she didn't need to fear new things anymore. She is now happy and excited to be working towards a great future out there in the forest. Even though there are days she still feels sad and doesn't want to leave her den, she has the courage to get up and work harder than ever for things she wants.

Talitha Christensen ***The Darkest Hour***

I woke up and I felt so tired. Funny how that is, that you can sleep so hard it makes you tired. I climbed out of bed and my body ached. My steps were unsteady as I made my way to the living room to cuddle my mom and watch a show before I started my day. These were the moments I couldn't wait for everyday I looked forward to the next morning so I could cuddle my mom. I eventually got ready and headed to my first period class. It started at a about midday because I was a senior and I already had most of my credits to graduate. When I got to my class I sat down next to my friends, and they were talking about some virus that has been going around. They said not to worry because it will only affect those who are immune compromised. Little did they know that was me. I have spent what feels like half of my life being sick.

When I went to work later that day at Taco Bell it was the same thing everyone was talking about this new virus and that we shouldn't worry about it unless you have a weak immune system. I have a weak immune system, I am immunocompromised. To them this was just banter. To me it was terrifying. I could die from this virus. When I went home that day my mom was in my room, and I walked in. "What's going on?" I tried to sound calm. My mom was filling a bag full of clothes. That was my bag full of my clothes, she was packing a bag for me. My mom's eyes were full of tears. "You're going to your grandparents." Her voice was sharp yet weak. I didn't want to leave my parents and all my siblings. My family is large, and they live in a large city. It makes sense to live in a smaller town in a house with fewer people. I don't want to go though. I would rather stay here and take my chances. I don't want to be so far away from my family they are my support system. I told her I would go if someone near by got the virus. About three days had passed and everybody was freaking out because someone in my town had gotten the virus. It was unexplainable, they got symptoms like to flu until people witnessed him bite into his neighbor and eat him. This was no ordinary virus; this was the apocalypse, and I was in extreme danger. I had no choice, I had to leave. I told my mom that I loved her, I grabbed the already packed bag, said goodbye to my whole family, and I left on my long journey.

When I arrived, I had to leave all my things in the car. I had to make sure there was enough room for my stuff in the basement. There was not. I contacted all of my friends to see if anyone could help me, there was boxes nearly touching the ceiling. My grandparents were already down there sorting through everything. I just needed some extra help. The only person who could help me was someone I had been mostly talking to online, his name was Stetson, and we've only hung out twice before. He came over every single day until the basement was finished. I felt alone and my heart ached to be with my parents and siblings. My grandparents are good people and I love them too, but they like to keep to themselves. Having Stetson over gave me comfort and he understood what it was like leaving everything that you know behind.

He made the transition easier. I was settled in the basement and Stetson came over to hang out with me, I needed to go into town; but I didn't dare do that alone because of the infected. "I'll go with you," his voice was soft and warm. I simply nodded and we went into town to grab supplies for the home. It was hard to tell at first glance who was infected so we avoided everyone that we could. He didn't have to do this because he had a strong immune system and the virus only changes those who are immunocompromised into what seemed like zombies. For him if he were to get the virus, he would only feel some minor symptoms and minor side effects like loss of taste or smell. While we were in the grocery store, I couldn't help but look at him with admiration he had shown me how to be strong and stand on my own. "Watch out!" I turn to see someone who was blatantly sick behind me, and I jump backwards, fear filling my heart. He lunges forward with the cart smacking the infected with it. We grab a few essentials as we ran out of the store. I had gotten so close to it.

I could have gotten it. It can start out from and airborne illness and progress into the flu, from there it takes over the mind and there's no going back. Not for the ones with weak immune systems. My grandparents weren't home when we got there. It was perfect, I quickly grabbed my things, and we went to his place, so he could grab his things. Then we left. We drove for hours until we stopped and found an empty home to stay in for a while. I reached out to my grandparents to tell them why I left. They understood. I didn't want to infect them. This was the only way. Now it was just me and Stetson. He came with me. He protected me. On our down time he would teach me how to protect myself how to fight. He also kept an eye on me to make sure I didn't get sick. I couldn't go back until we were sure that I wasn't infected. There was no cure. There was only waiting and seeing what happens.

After about a month of training and waiting we decided that I was okay. I felt sad, I had left two places that made me feel safe. I was now in the unknown. Stetson knew what he was doing, all I could do was follow his lead. Being away from my family and fighting this unknown virus were the hardest things I've ever done. Waking up every morning felt like walking through mud. Beating the virus felt like a chore. I felt like things were meaningless and that I wouldn't make it through I had no will to push forward some days, but Stetson did, and he stayed by my side through it all. I cried most days. He didn't care that I was a complete mess and he could have left, but he didn't. I was in love with him. He walked up to me one morning, saying how beautiful I was even though I had bed head. All he had to do was look me in the eye and I leaned into him. I understood then that he felt the same way. We were in love. We didn't care about how long we had known each other. We decided to get married. We thought that it would be okay to have a small gathering. During our wedding there was an outbreak. I was fighting off the infected in my wedding dress. I was fighting them off on my own, but I had to be very careful. Stetson couldn't protect me from all the infected.

We managed to get out of there and get married. After we got married, we drove into the woods and found a safe place to recuperate. I was alone, but I didn't feel so sad. After about a week we realized that there were less infected. When we started heading back to my parents, I realized they created a way to prevent people from becoming infected. I could finally go back into the world I once knew before the apocalypse happened, but now I found the love of my life.

Jaynine Thompson

The Hero's Journey

My story begins in the projects of Jersey City, New Jersey, on September 4th, 1993. I was born to a young woman who was 15 years of age and was struggling with drugs, alcohol, and gang affiliation. My mother loved me very much and so did my grandmother who we lived with. My father wasn't in the picture. He was in jail for some crimes he committed and my mother who was so young and rebellious was off meeting other people who had things that could numb the pain.

Everything was normal to me, dysfunctional, but normal, until the separation. I was about 5 and half years old when I was separated from my mother. She decided to meet up with some guy I had never seen before and sat down with him on the curb in a parking lot as I began to play in a dirt patch nearby. Making ant trails was my favorite thing to do when waiting up for my mom. I would call out to her to see all the cool things I made the ants do, but this one time she didn't respond. I looked over to see why she wasn't answering and saw she was collapsed on the ground.

The ambulance and police eventually came after several panicked calls by pedestrians and that was when they took me away for good. As you would expect, I was put into foster care. After spending a whole day at the police station some people came by and picked me up and brought me to this random lady's home. They said I would be here for a bit, and I would be safe, they were going to find me a family. I didn't understand why they needed to find me a family, I already had one. I just needed to go back to my mom, but instead I stayed with this family I had never met before.

I can't remember exactly how long I was with this family, but a kind lady came by named Deidra I believe, and she was my social worker. She along with someone else wanted to make sure I was comfortable and safe. She was really kind, and they brought me to another family that would take care of me while they helped me with my family. By this time, I kind of knew that I wouldn't see my mom for a while because she wasn't ok. These social workers told me that I had a good heart and that one day I would help other kids who were in my situation feel better about it. I knew I wanted to sing for the rest of my life, I didn't want to be a social worker.

While with this new family I received a call one day from a man that worked with my social workers. He said they found family that I could live with, and he asked if I wanted to meet them. I didn't have any memory of these people, but I guess they knew me, and they knew my mom. I went to their house, and it was huge with lots of kids! They made my favorite food and I got to watch my favorite shows. I really liked them and so my social workers decided that I could live with them. I still missed my mom very much, but so much time had passed, and I wanted to be with family.

Eventually my social workers helped my family qualify to adopt me and who I was literally changed. I now had a new mom, and I had a dad. I was no longer an only child, I had siblings, and I even had a grandmother. But things didn't stay as peachy as they were. There were people in the family who were mean and bullied me and my brother. Some of the people tried to break us apart and my mother reappeared and attacked the house we were living in. Seeing her again confused me and I wasn't sure if I should be accepting this new life. Going through my teenage years my emotions became more unstable. I was struggling with my identity and felt a lack of connection with my parents. They also started changing with me and I felt like they were angry with me. They had decided to leave the home we were in because of issues with family members and my mother's harassment. But none of that was my fault, but they surely made me feel that way.

My parents and I began fighting and arguing and our relationship became toxic. There wasn't a day that would go by that didn't end in tears and screams. My chores continued to grow, and my privileges were all eliminated. I barely had time for homework. Things had literally become abusive, and I felt no desire to live with my family anymore. I wanted to figure out who I was and what I was capable of, but they gave me no space to do so. I had completely broken down and had no desire to exist, but that changed for me when I developed my spirituality. In November of 2014 I embarked on a religious mission for 19 months. I learned how to pray and ask questions and listen for answers. I was taught how to serve others who were in need. Even when I felt like I was in need. I was uplifted and filled with confidence. I no longer needed anyone to tell me how to live my life. I could choose for myself and know if it was the right or wrong choice.

My mission ended 19 months later, and it was time for me to go back home. I didn't want to go home. I feared what I would encounter, and I was worried about what would happen to my spirituality. I had been told so many stories while I was gone on the state of my family, but I had this feeling deep down that it was just on the surface. Of course, my intuition was right and there were many things wrong. A few short months after my return home my grandmother passed away and her death seemed to be the spark that lit the flame. My parents lost all composure and with my newfound strength I tried to keep things together for as long as possible. It literally was impossible. My parents became very manipulative and controlling and I felt as if things were returning to how they were before. If anything, I felt like it was worse. I began dating someone I knew from my mission, but it was long distance. I felt like he was good for me and I for him. I let my spirituality guide me in this choice and I would continue to confirm it during our courtship. My parents were enraged, specifically my father.

Since my arrival home I had become the one that he relied on for his sales business. He needed me to continue to labor so he could make a comfortable living. I was tired and felt used but knew that I had to prioritize myself. I now knew how to do that, and I planned on making sure of that. A year after we started dating, I decided to get married to my now husband despite my parents. I left their home and moved to Utah to finally create my own home. I love it here and have found a field that I am passionate about, social work. I still sing and aspire to be a singer, but I know that I can impact more lives as a social worker and help other "kids" see that it's not so bad. I have created a spiritual environment in my home that I love and feel safe in. I am safe and I am happy.

02

Our Lessons Learned

Here, students craft essays that delve into what they've learned through their experiences before coming to USU and during their first semesters in college.

Diving into subjects like resilience, what it means to be a first-generation college student, and becoming a scholar, students develop and share moments of insight and discovery.

Bryan Armenta

For as long as I can remember, I have always been interested in learning, for the purposes of both satisfying my intellectual curiosity and seeking the tools to create a better future for my family. Despite being raised by poor immigrant parents who barely scraped by every day, I was fortunately in a good enough financial situation to continue my education in the United States.

This was a privilege that my parents had been unable to complete, as they both dropped out of school in Mexico and did not know English either. This hard work from them paid off, as it inspired me to work hard myself. After going through the schooling systems in both Mexico and the United States, I eventually graduated as valedictorian from a high school in Utah. However, upon learning about this, I found that it was not the life-changing experience I had expected such an announcement to be.

One of my greatest experiences in learning came when I was in fifth grade. While many of my classmates spent much of their time reading novels, I entertained myself in my own way by practicing calculations in my head. I figured out the concept of exponents before I was formally taught it in class. Six multiplied by itself six times? That's 46,656. That was a difficult calculation for me at the time, but I had more than enough of that while waiting in the lunch line.

At this point, the times tables taught in class were committed to my memory.

However, what I did not realize at that time was how shallow my understanding of

mathematics was. Mathematics is much more than just multiplications of large numbers, and I was unaware of this. This all changed when my fifth-grade teacher introduced to the class the concept of algebra. X plus two equals five broke my mind when I first saw it written on the whiteboard. Introducing letters into mathematics made no sense to me at the time, and it was then that I realized that I still had much left to learn in this vast field.

It was in high school that I decided to take my first computer science class, which was an eye-opening experience that showed me how the magic of coding is not really magical at all. In that class that I earned my interest in coding, as I found the process of learning to be incredibly interesting. Learning the process of studying new tools and applying them to a project, and learning through trial-and-error, brought a new dimension of learning to my life.

Gaby Bosen

Join Me to Open the Wide Horizon in Sustainable Conservation Tourism

While considering career paths, I wanted to love and be good at what I would pursue. I stumbled into the world of conservation when I participated in a sea turtle conservation project in Costa Rica. This project showed me a whole new field of work that seemed to suit my academic and my personal interests.

I chose QCNR as it is small enough for me to make an impact, yet significant enough to change the world. For as long as I can remember, science and math have been my strongest, most interesting, and most enjoyable subjects in school. This passion has been driven by my intellectual need to know the 'how' and 'why' of the natural world and the way it works. I think that my objective reasoning and aptitude for math and statistics fits well within the field of natural resource sciences.

All my life, I have had an inherent desire for being in and learning about nature. I have always loved observing and learning about the connections between organisms, and between nature and people. As kids, my dad would take us to the creek to play with frogs and salamanders. I was the one keeping my brothers from pulling the legs off. I get angry seeing graffiti or carving on trees. These examples highlight the inevitable interactions between man and the environment.

In Costa Rica, I observed a conflict between many locals and the endangered species. The biggest threat to these sea turtles is the poaching of their shells, eggs, and even meat. Another example of human wants and needs harming nature can be shown at my local beaches in Cape Cod. These beaches are littered with debris left behind from beachgoers as well as debris washed up onshore. I am sickened by this theme of humans thriving at the expense of the world's ecosystems.

With my degree in Conservation and Restoration Ecology, I anticipate leading a Latin American based animal rescue NGO. I am Latin-American and I am becoming bilingual. This fuels my passion to serve Latin American wildlife and their ecosystems, as well as sustaining the local community. I foresee running this NGO with scientifically based data and ensuring to have a focus on teaching ecologically best practices instead of running on the exploitation of 'cute cuddly' animals.

Unfortunately, all too often wildlife tourism is corrupt and endangering animals to satisfy a profit margin. With the use of social media and new technologies, wildlife tourism can still exist without endangering animals and their greater ecosystems. With my degree in Conservation and Restoration Ecology, my ultimate goal is to start my own NGO that actively works to help endangered and injured wildlife, collect data to further the conservation of these animals, and progress sustainable wildlife tourism through the use of technology and social media. For example, I hope to form an organization located in Latin America that leverages virtual shadowing of endangered and injured native species.

Our group would be hands-on, staffed by university and local researchers, and our methods would collect data via GPS collars, satellites, and cameras. To garner broad acceptance, we would stream footage and stories from volunteers, researchers, and most importantly, from the animals themselves. Those stories will be broadcast on multiple social platforms such as Patreon, Instagram, Facebook, GoFundMe, Kickstarters, and other active crowdfunding platforms of the times. The followers will generate emotional connection, scientific support, and financial backing. As technological devices become increasingly available, specifically smaller and less invasive, and social media platforms morph to tell stories large and small. I hope Utah State University and the Quinney College of Natural Resources will join me in my quest to chart the next wide open horizon in sustainable conservation tourism.

Alejandro Bustamante

According to Oxford, resilience is “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties.” Although this is likely the most accepted definition of resilience, I think there is still much to add to my personal definition of it. I think resilience has a lot to do with the morals and morale of the person being capable of jumping into the unknown, and miraculously recovering from let downs, and obstacles.

Throughout my Jr. High years I've never had much trouble absorbing and retaining the material, and therefore never deemed it necessary to study. However, during my high school years, I found out about the importance of studying and failure, the latter having always been one of my greatest fears growing up. My fear of failing to accomplish or succeed prevented me from joining clubs, saying what was on my mind, and acting in situations.

I've only recently learned how failure is an important step to success, and how good of a teacher it can be. I still haven't completely gotten over my fear of failure, but at the very least I know there's opportunity to grow. Studying is a good example of a field that offers a lot of space to grow. Like I said, studying hasn't been a big part of my education, at least until now. Here at USU one of the most difficult obstacles I've had to face and show true resilience with is finding a fitting study habit for myself. I've tried making schedules, setting timers, isolation, apps, etc. and haven't felt completely comfortable with any plan yet. I have a lot of time on my hands during the day so I know availability isn't the problem. I just seem to find it difficult to sit down and write a paper, or read an article for a long period of time, and although I keep failing to find a good study plan, I can feel myself getting closer and closer with each attempt. This is why resilience is important, it keeps us moving forward in the face of failure.

Speaking of important things, I quickly wanted to talk about how important it is for me to be a first-generation college student. I can definitely feel the pressure of the first in my family to attend college, and I can think of a couple good reasons for why it's important that I succeed.

Whether I like it or not, I'm now a role model for the future generation of children in my family, and as a believer in the importance of education I need to make sure that I'm a good one too. I'm now going to be the person to ask college questions to, so it's important that I learn as much as I can about the resources here. On a personal note, I never realized how important it was to be a first-generation when I initially signed up for college. Funny enough, I also didn't realize the scale of much I lucked out when I won my full ride scholarship, I'm only now starting to grasp the importance of it all.

The fact that I'm the one who gets to break the cycle of poor education, and substance abuse in my family really makes me proud. I've come a long way, and I couldn't name all the people who have risked their careers, lives, or sacrificed something for me to get here even if I tried. I've been dreaming of this experience ever since elementary, this means the world to me, and I don't plan on throwing it away anytime soon.

JC Cole

Resilience, “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.” This word is super important to me. I myself had to be resilient so many times in my life and I am so glad to have this strength. Almost a year and a half ago I got diagnosed with T1D then a couple months after I got diagnosed with Celiac disease. This was the summer of Covid so everything was a bit crazy still. I was healthy not even a year before this then all of a sudden it hit me and I had to adjust my whole lifestyle. This was not an easy thing to do, especially with being a competitive athlete.

I had a hard time getting enough energy to do what I wanted to do. It took time and so much effort to get my body to adjust to this huge change. The biggest thing that helped me to overcome this challenge was probably the support of my family and friends. I don't know what I would do without my family. They have always been there for me and supported my decisions and helped me no matter what. Also, keeping my head up and looking at the positive in everything I did helped me to overcome this challenge.

This is always going to be a challenge in my life now, but I think it'll always make me stronger. Everyone has challenges and trials that they need to overcome. Once they do, I think, they are so much more confident in themselves.

Resilience, “ability to bounce back,” I like this second definition a lot because no matter what, everyone can bounce back from any challenge or trial. You just have to believe in yourself and ask for help when needed.

Being a first-generation college student, to me, means that my parents didn't go to or had a very little college experience. I never knew about this program until I got to USU and I am so glad I decided to join. Being an AFS means I don't have a close relationship with someone who has had a college experience.

While getting everything set up with college, I had to ask so many people because neither me or my parents knew what to do. This made it a bit hard to transition to college, but I am so grateful for this program and how much it has helped me. I have an amazing mentor, Seyona, who has been a great example and has just been like a friend to me. She is always answering questions and giving us some tips/advice. I know if I ever needed help, I could talk with her. Our group is also super awesome! We have some really great conversations and they can make me laugh all the time. I always have a good time going to our activities. We have had a few get together activities, we usually get some food and sometimes will play a game. Our group gets along pretty well. Participating within this program has helped me tremendously by teaching me about resources, building my confidence, making new friends, and just knowing that I am not alone. I hope to continue with this program and be able to help students with this transition into college and help them to know that they are not alone. I want to become a mentor and be able to make that small difference in someone else's college experience. By doing this I believe it can help my school by helping with the transition of new students. It can help by providing resources to students who need it and by providing a friend for those who might be struggling. I hope to keep up with this along with some other clubs I am involved in to help my school to be the best.

My college experience has been short, but has shown me that life is pretty great and that there are so many people who are willing to help me. I am so excited to see throughout the rest of my college experience how much I grow and can make a difference in other students' lives. So far the biggest takeaways I have learned is, don't ever give up, chase your dreams, and to enjoy

Siclali Garcia

As a first-generation student and a daughter to immigrant parents, I felt like I had a life full of purposes and responsibilities. My parents made the ultimate sacrifices for me, so I can have a chance for a better future. I loved learning and going to school from a young age, and even won a series of academic awards. Seeing how proud my parents became, the tears in their eyes, knowing all their sacrifices were worth it for their daughters, became my lifelong motivation.

High school became harder and it became difficult, handling two jobs, balancing school, and doing a series of other extracurriculars. The pressure became too much for me to handle. I found myself in a dark time, questioning what I would do with my life, questioning if my sleepless nights were worth it. Going to college wasn't any easier. I was going to a different college than my friends and I thought I would be able to adjust, but it was harder than I thought.

One weekend, I went home and found myself breaking down to my mom. In my head, I thought, I can't do this. I thought I was strong enough, smart enough, but I am not. It was then that I realized the importance of memories. Siclali, you have a purpose, great potential, and remember how many things you achieved. You can do this.

In high school, I achieved things that empowered me at an unexpected level. My dream was to travel the world. I loved learning languages and other cultures. However, I thought this would stay a dream. I had been learning Mandarin Chinese in high school, and it was my second year as a junior when I came upon an amazing opportunity. Every other year, 10 students would apply to travel to China for two weeks to get immersed in the culture and language. It was a very expensive trip as well, which made me think this was out of the question for me.

This trip kept running on my mind the entire day, and I was sad and disappointed because I never thought someone like me could ever deserve this. My mom noticed how distraught I was when I came home that day, and when I told her how I felt, she looked me in the eye and said, "Why are you giving up so easily? Why do you think you can't do this? If you want this for yourself, you need to make it happen." I worked hard all year, working overtime some days, but when I got the acceptance letter back, it made all my hard work worthwhile. This just empowered me to pursue even more opportunities to do the things I love.

In my senior year, I heard of an amazing opportunity for a study abroad program, National Security Language Initiative. It was an opportunity for high school students to earn a full scholarship to study abroad. It sounded too great to be true. It was a very difficult program to be accepted into, having to complete a very long and difficult application process and having an acceptance program of 19%. I even have people that I looked up to tell me I can't do this and to not be disappointed when I don't get accepted. But I learned that everything was worth a try.

I later received a letter of acceptance to study abroad in South Korea for three months. It had to be held virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but I was still over the moon to have this opportunity.

These life experiences have shaped me to not give up and to persevere, as I am now doing in college. I am capable of much more than the world may tell me that I deserve. I am now looking into teaching English abroad in either China or South Korea and helping push students to achieve their full potential while doing what I love. I am excited for what I will achieve next and to continue to make my parents proud.

Chris Marshall

As a first-generation student, I've had to overcome challenges that other people haven't faced. My parents did not attend college, so they can't mentor me throughout the next four years. However, I've found ways to show resilience and overcome challenges that have appeared in my path. I've only been in college for several months, but I've already found leadership positions and extracurriculars to get involved with.

To understand my journey through college, it's important to understand my experience in high school. I was homeschooled, so I didn't have a college advisor to help me pick a college or understand any of the terms that college comes with, such as grants, loans, or scholarships. I had to learn about college and how to apply to college by myself, which was a challenge. I ended up applying to fifteen different colleges across the country.

Because I didn't have a SAT score due to the COVID-19 pandemic cancelling all of my test dates, I had a harder time with financial aid and scholarships. If I had a SAT score, I would have gotten more scholarships, but I had to settle for what I got. I could have even gotten a full-ride scholarship to Utah State University based on my practice test scores, but I didn't get it. So, I had to figure out ways to finance my education.

I applied to several private scholarships, but didn't get accepted for any of them. I made a deal with my parents where they would help me pay for college, but I have to pay them back once I get a career. Now that I am finally in college, I've taken advantage of various opportunities on campus. I'm currently serving as the Activities Coordinator for the Interfaith Student Association, which is helping me make connections with people of different faiths. I've also become the vice-president of the West Campus Hall Council, and have attended the Intermountain Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls' Regional Leadership School. Having those opportunities has helped me become a better leader.

I've also applied to become a Resident Assistant for the 2022-2023 academic year. I don't know if I'll get the position or not, but it still provides an opportunity to learn about applying for jobs and interviewing. I want to become a Resident Assistant as it will help me learn about leading people, pointing people to resources, improving my communication skills, and helping me afford college better.

Overall, I'm using my experience as a first-generation college student to train myself to be a more independent person. Having to deal with new experiences by myself helps me become more mature. Throughout the rest of my college experience, I hope to gain more knowledge about leadership and discover new opportunities so I can become a well-rounded person. Being a first-generation student has made my journey in college more difficult, but programs such as Aggie First Scholars help me overcome that gap.

Alesandro Rodriguez

Resilience, resilience to me is the ability to become stronger after failing or doing something bad. Though I do not like to mention it as doing something bad, I associate it more towards coming back from a failure. Being resilient is not for everyone. It is for those who work for it. Throughout my life I have shown resilience in many ways.

The one memory that does define my resiliency happened in my last two years of high school. First off, it all started when I decided to audition for the All-State band in my junior year. I was very ambitious at the time, and wanted to take my musical skills to the next level. I wanted to play with the very best high schoolers in the state of Utah. In order to do that we had to audition. I spent countless hours practicing. I would spend my lunch break and after school hours practicing for the audition. Slowly but surely, I would start to take grasp of the music I was learning and become confident. The day would come where I would have to record and send my audition. I waited about a month for the results.

Unfortunately, I didn't get the result I wanted, but I did make it as an alternative. Months later, it would be my senior year, and it was that time again. Through the months, I kept practicing. There were many times where I was very unmotivated. Albeit, I kept pushing myself because I knew I could go on to do something great. Through the help of my teacher, mentor, Ms. Ravitch, I was able to master the piece of music for the audition. One month later, after many hours of hard work and learning from my past failures, I made it into the roster of the All-State band. Thus making me one of the best baritone saxophonists in the state of Utah. It was an unbelievable achievement of resilience I was able to show. Not only was I able to be resilient, but I was able to show my peers the leadership and how hard work pays off.

Another way I am showing resilience now is by being a first-generation college student. I know for a fact there will be many moments where I feel down, but I also know that I will rise and reach new heights than ever before. I will be the first in my family to experience this on an educational level, and I know that I am more than ready to take on this journey. I am here to have a college experience. What do I mean by college experience? By college experience I mean that I am here to develop my habits of mind skills, I am here to learn, I am here to acquire new skills, and I am here to grow as a person and excel in many categories. It means so much that I will be able to do this, not because I am in college, but because I am the first in my family to go to college. I want to be known as a leader amongst my siblings and cousins that if I can do it, then they can do it. This opportunity I have of being able to attend college is something I won't take for granted because if it was easy, everyone would be doing it. A way I give back to the school is by being in the marching band and many other things. As for marching band, in every home football game, we are always playing and being positive no matter the scoreline. We are always giving it our best to make sure the players are motivated one way or the other. One other way I am going to show leadership is doing community service of sorts. I'm still planning on what I am going to do, but the most likely thing is picking up trash around campus. My AFS mentor is Brooklyn Bullard! I am very glad I got her as a mentor. She is always listening, and always looking for times that work for us to meet up once in a while. As stated before, I am very glad I got her as a mentor.

On the topic of AFS, I have enjoyed my time so far. Being an AFS scholar has been great. I have been able to learn many skills, opportunities, and college related topics to help me further succeed with my goals. On the second day of class, Charity challenged herself to learn all of our names in one class day. I thought this was a very nice gesture, which very much excited me about the class and how willing she is to get to know us and help us. I can't wait to be introduced to many new things in the upcoming weeks because it is something I very much look forward to.

03

Our Future Leaders

Our Aggie First Scholars have excellent expertise and experiences to become leaders here at USU and beyond. Through AFS, students develop valuable leadership and mentorship skills. They learn about networking, communication, and perseverance, but more importantly, they know they belong in these positions. Dismantling stigma and challenging deficit thinking about their identities, first-generation college students proudly convey their purpose, high aspirations, and their strengths as learners and leaders.

The contributions of our first-generation students make USU a better and brighter community.

Madison Criddle

I belong as a leader at USU because I believe that I can make an impact on other students' lives. One of my goals is to accomplish non-academical pursuits, whether that be in leadership or through community service. I also want to graduate college with no debt. I believe that that goal can be something that others can also accomplish. The skill to try and graduate debt-free requires organization and dedication, which are very good skills to have in any leadership position. Some strengths that I have are prioritizing, working as a team, and organizing. I use these strengths every day through babysitting and my school work. Through using these skills, I can create a positive experience in the situations that I am put in.

April Horrocks

I believe that I belong as a leader at USU because I have the drive to want to make a difference. I love USU but I think that some things could change and improve. For example I feel like we have a ton of resources available to the students here at USU but, some of them aren't being taken advantage of because they aren't well advertised to all of the student body. My desire is to take advantage of all of the available resources so I have personal experiences to share with people when they are in need of help. I also have a goal to talk more in my classes and to the people around me. Sometimes in larger groups it's hard for me to share even when I have something valuable to say. Some of my strengths would be that I am very good at organizing and listening. I also hate conflict so I am super good at resolving it in a speedy manner in order to keep the peace around me. These help me because I have a routine and I don't usually forget to do things. People also feel very comfortable around me because I don't like people feeling like they don't belong.

Dania Pantaleon

I belong as a leader because I want to be that person who my mentees can have a leader to go to and talk if they are having a bad day, but as well as learn in the process. Some of my dreams and goals are to one day be successful and be my own boss and share my story with others. Some leadership skills would include definitely public speaking, listening skills, goal setting, and communication skills. I am an introvert person and I know that one day I will have to get out of my comfort zone in order to accomplish those dreams and goal I have. I believe that making goals makes me want to work harder for my future career. There are times where I want to just quit but as a leader I have to commit to straying strong and achieve great thing. Some skills that I have is being organized, am a good listener, and being patient. I believe that these skills help me be a better person each day, and learn new things which I can apply in my life. Since, I work as a waitress I have learned to be patient with customers and to listen careful and meet their needs first.

Ammy Morales

I belong as a student leader here at USU to show representation as a first-gen Latina team lead, and to support/aid my fellow peers. My dream is to manage my own business one day. Whether that be a clothing store, jewelry store, or a hair salon; I aspire to center my business around giving back to the community, especially underrepresented communities. I want to create funds to help students afford college, and programs for adults in second language learning or certification classes. Leadership skills that I will use are persistence, determination, and networking. Three strengths of mine are organization, networking, and passion for my goals. I use these strengths in class by getting to know my peers and prepping for exams. Outside of the classroom I use my passion to give back to the community when organizing events for the Latinx community here on campus or reaching out to my mentees as a Team lead.

Joseph Ocampo Trujillo

Throughout the years I've had the privilege to experience many different leadership positions. I believe I belong as a USU leader because I want to increase the rates of graduation between first-generation and minority students. After graduation I have the goal in opening my own dietitian practitioner here in the valley. If that goes well I would like to start a scholarship for minorities and first-generation students. Leadership skills will be critical because I need communication, team-working, and involvement skills to make this big goal possible. 3 of my strengths include organizing, prioritizing, and communicating when I need help. As a college student I use these 3 strengths on a daily basis. I organize my schedule throughout the week and prioritize the most important things first. I also communicate with a professor or another student when I don't understand something. This makes it much easier on me than just stressing myself about it.

Adam Manassra

Becoming a leader at USU will give me the opportunity to give back to the community that welcomed me as an immigrant eight years ago, when I came from a country that did not offer as many opportunities and did not have the greatest education system. Therefore, I value every chance I get to better myself and my education. I also strive for creating unity as well as a sense of belonging to each student at Utah State University. One of my goals is to become a dentist, dentists don't have the best reputation because people are always afraid of going to the dentist. I want to change this when I have my own practice by making the environment very friendly and make sure everyone enjoys going to the dentist. A dream of mine is to take care of my family any way I can because they have done so much for me. My three strengths: work ethic, communication, and problem solving. I use these strengths everyday through soccer and my academic life.

Meg Kast

I belong as a leader at USU because I feel that I am good at helping people feel included. All throughout my childhood and throughout my high school years, there was always a time that I had felt left out of something. Because of this, I strive to help others feel as included as I can, and especially as first-generation students we can often feel like we don't belong. One of my strengths that I use to help people feel included is the fact that I have many different hobbies. This allows me to almost always have a common interest with people I meet, that we can then talk about and bond over, also helping them to feel more comfortable around me and think of me as someone they can come to if they need me. Another one of my strengths is that I am an introverted extrovert. I feel that this helps me connect with the people who necessarily like being in large groups. I'm able to relate to them on how overwhelming large groups can be and I can also help them be a part of the group with the little bit of extrovertedness that I have.

Kayla Kraus

I belong as a leader at USU because I've had lots of experiences that groups of minorities may go through. Having these experiences help me relate to my fellow team and give me good background knowledge to help others. My desire is that everyone who needs or wants help can find it. My goal is to contribute into the great community that we have here which will take openness and communication skills. I believe my top three strengths are patients, open/nonjudgmental communication, and kindness. Showing other's kindness and patience is so rewarding in the little things. Sometimes it takes a long to see the effects but when I do it only encourages me to be even better. Sometimes it's being better with my roommates other times it's helping a fellow Aggie.

04

Our Gratitude

Aggie First Scholars benefit from the generosity of donors who strive to see students succeed. Donor support allows for the scholarships, events, and initiatives that help first-generation college students grow here at USU.

In these letters, students express their gratitude and share the very real impact these donations make in the lives of our Aggie First Scholars.

Madison Criddle

I am so thankful that you made it possible for AFS to happen. I am so thankful that I can get support and meet new people through the mentoring meals. I have learned so much and am looking forward to giving back to the program in the future. I am so thankful that the events through AFS are there. I love that I can learn about different resources and things on campus. These are all different things that I am thankful for. I have learned so many things from the time that I have already been able to participate in due to AFS. Again, I want to say thank you for all that you have done to make these things possible for the program, that I can be a part of.

Danise Gasio

Thank you for all that you are willing to do in order to make sure that our AFS program is able to continue. We appreciate that you see value in our program by sponsoring our classes and events. Personally, for me, I appreciate the AFS program because it has started to help me see that maybe I can do something really important with what I decide to do in the future. Not only that but the program has been able to help me connect to all kinds of different resources that have been helping along my way. Because of the AFS program, I've come to realize that sometimes when having to do things I may not be the first person per se but I am doing the task with all that I can give and I feel accomplished because of it. Thank you to our sponsors because of all of you we are able to connect to not only resources but to others who have been or are going through similar things, whether they are personal or educational. Because of this program, I feel like I can say that I have a place where it feels like a home away from home which I truly appreciate.

April Horrocks

I am so grateful for the opportunity that I have to participate in the Aggie First Scholars program. It has been something that really has changed my life. Life as a first-generation student has its difficulties because you aren't always aware of all of the opportunities that are available to you. Through the class, activities, and dinners I have been able to learn about a ton of different opportunities that I have available to me that without this program I would have had no clue I was eligible for. It has been a wonderful opportunity to be able to get to know and work with these people that are in the same situation as I am. Thank you so much for contributing and helping to make this program happen.

Connor Mays

Being new to the AFS program, I am very grateful and impressed by the opportunities that are available to me. Mentoring meals that are given to us through USU dining services has been a great experience for me where I have been able to meet other people in the program. This is something that is only available to us through their generous donation and I am so grateful for that. I hope to be a mentor next year so I can help incoming students in the program meet other people like them and help them with anything that they might need. Mentor meals are a big part of the program and I hope they will always be available to us.

There are plenty of events and scholarships that are available to AFS through campus partners. This is extremely appreciated because being a first gen student there are certain things that are just harder to do. These partners can recognize that and make the college experience a lot more enjoyable and are doing a great job at it as well. I believe that some of the things that are donated to AFS are really helping some people be able to stay in college and pursue what they are passionate about. From me and all the other Aggie First Scholars, thank you for everything and know that we really appreciate it.

Bryan Armenta

As a student in the Aggie First Scholars Program, I am incredibly grateful for the role you have played in supporting the program. As many students in the program have found, it is a challenging experience to be the first in your family to attend college. In my case, my parents and siblings are Mexican immigrants who never had the opportunity to attend college, and have unfortunately been unable to help me in that regard. This is the gap that the Aggie First Scholars Program has filled perfectly. The AFS course has provided me with plenty of fundamental knowledge about college life that I likely would have missed out on otherwise. Were it not for the course, I likely would not have made it past the title of my resume, nor would I have known where to find reliable sources of help and feedback for writing it. Luckily, this course helped fill that gap in my knowledge and pushed me to use it, leading to me completing the first resume I have ever written. This is only one of several topics that the course has taught, another important one being how to find and write applications for scholarships. Additionally, both the class and the regular mentor meals have helped provide environments to meet other students, which has been one of the countless challenges in my college experience. Overall, the Aggie First Scholars Program has greatly benefitted me, as I am sure it has helped many other first-generation college students. I am grateful for your support of the program, and I hope you will continue supporting it to continue helping students like me.

Lydia Barrientos

You are so generous, thank you so much for all you do for our Aggie First Program! I sincerely appreciate the gesture. I was already a die-hard Pepsi fan, but now I love you even more! The support that you have given our program is so sweet and considerate. It makes me feel encouraged and to be here and continue on my journey of a better life for myself and my family. I have felt a warm welcome, so thank you. Thank you!

Alejandro Bustamante

On the behalf of AFS we'd like to express our deep gratitude towards you for seeing the value in, and sponsoring our program. Thanks to you we're provided with the resources to learn the necessary skills we need to make it through college, such as people, scholarship, and money skills. Personally, your help has meant the world to me, the skills I've been picking up on thanks to your help have already been proving themselves useful. Your help has pacified many of my fears being a first-generation student. Thanks to you, I now know I have people I can talk to about my worries when facing college. This opportunity has been a light in my life, thank you.

Talitha Christensen

Thank you for all your support. I have only been in the program for a short time, but it has been a blast and has brought me out of my comfort zone. This program would not be what it is without all your support. With all the fun things we get to do it makes me look forward to the activities and the things we get to learn. I don't feel so alone in my journey, and I feel supported by so many people. I feel more capable of achieving my goals knowing that there is a group of people supporting me and that have faith in me. Thank you for supporting me and people like me. It makes a huge difference in my life and I'm sure in theirs too. The journey of being a first-generation college student isn't an easy one, but it is sponsors, mentors, and peers that make the journey a better one. I can't thank you enough for what you have done for us. You have my gratitude.

Abby Evans

I just wanted to take a minute to express my appreciation for all that you do for the AFS program. The mentoring meals and events give us the opportunity to connect and associate with other first-generation students that we probably wouldn't get to experience any other way. I'm grateful for the scholarships that are provided for the AFS program and the time and support, you put into us as we go through our academic journey.

Owen Graham

Thank you for believing in my classmates and I as we take steps to better ourselves and to succeed in reaching our goals. College is already difficult as it is but it can be even more so when you don't know the resources that you have at your disposal and where to turn for help. The AFS program has provided me with access to peers, and friends, who come from a similar background and have experienced and persevered through the challenges that I, and my AFS classmates, go through as we try to navigate college. This relationship that the AFS family has been so welcoming has made my transition into college so much smoother. This program has been incredibly beneficial during my two years at USU and it would not be possible without the generosity of you and other donors. From the bottom of my heart, thank you and Go Aggies!

Kayla Kraus

I would like to personally thank you for taking the time to donate to our scholar group. Thank you for all that you do. A special appreciation for the donated mentoring meals and scholarships. Not only were the mentoring meals physically fulfilling but mentally as well. I've learned so much through my mentor and other mentors that I got to meet on the way. Hopefully, I will be awarded a scholarship one day but I can almost guarantee whoever was lucky enough to be truly is blessed by your generosity.

Chris Marshall

Thank you for everything you do to support the Aggie First Scholars program here at Utah State University. Your donations and sponsorships help first-generation college students find a home and find success here in college. As a first-generation student myself, I would be lost without the Aggie First Scholars program. Your support helps me succeed in college. Without this program, I probably would not have ended up where I am today, so I am greatly appreciative of your support

Erick Ramirez

Being a part of Aggie First Scholars myself, I would like to thank each and every one of you for your generous support. Aggie First Scholars has really helped me be able to realize my potential with being here in college, especially being a first-generation student. I have been able to realize the importance of this program, and love how diverse and leader-based it is. Thank you for supporting us and our cause, making this one of the best programs here at Utah State University. Your donations don't go unnoticed; the events that I have been able to attend are all amazing and memorable, and I know that I speak for everyone when I say that we could not thank you enough!

Petelo Tolua

As a member of Aggie First Scholars and on behalf of the rest of the scholars, we want to thank you all for all that you've done. By sponsoring this wonderful program, you have not only made it possible but you have done so much more than giving us an opportunity to obtain our dreams. You have given us hope, opportunities, meals, gratitude, and a push towards our future. As a sponsor, I know it isn't much that we can do for you other than showing you our appreciation and proving to everyone else that we can procure our dreams. Without your help and the help from our mentors, I personally think it wouldn't be as easy to achieve my dream to become an Anesthesiologist. You have touched our hearts especially mine. Thank you again for all you have done!

Siclali Garcia

I personally wanted to thank you for your generous contribution to the AFS program. As a first year student, AFS has helped me feel more comfortable in going to USU. Your contribution goes toward mentoring meals, scholarships, and events that help students such as myself in making lifelong connections and striving at USU. This program has helped me have a community of students who share the same obstacles and a place where I can ask questions to our mentors.

THANK
you!



To all of our donors, AFS Faculty Advisory Committee, First Scholars Faculty & Staff, USU campus partners, and our Aggie First Scholars, Peer Mentors, and Team Leads... THANK YOU!

Much Love,
The AFS Leadership Team

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