



The Story Behind the Peer Leader: Who I Am, What I've Faced, Who I Was, Who I've Become, What I've Been Given, and What We Can Create

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Abstract

Sharing my story helps me define the potential and true power of Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL). This program is more than just facilitating learning. It is mentoring, coaching, relating, and shaping minds. Two years after I started serving as a Peer Leader, I am a different student and a different person than I once was. I have grown as a person, having to meet, work, and study with talented individuals. I have learned more ways to succeed. I have learned how to ask for help; and – very importantly – I've learned when to do so. Part of this story is to make sure the following goals are shared with my PLTL workshop students and the PLTL community: networking and finding a support system. As a Peer Leader, I want to see my students – and students everywhere – succeed, not just in chemistry but in all their classes. I want every student to have the same or better resources than I once had. PLTL makes that happen and has made me a better person. I share my experience of what this program has given me and what it could possibly give others too. PLTL can be the difference that helps students succeed.

Keywords: Personal Experience, Peer Leaders, Networking, Support System, Succeeding, Time Management

Who I am

My name is Xavier, I've been trying to get my bachelor's degree for nine years now and thanks to PLTL, I'm graduating soon. My story begins by telling my background. Learning through stories (Patterson, 2023) is powerful. Storytelling is how we come to terms with what is happening. The purpose of my story is to share the power of PLTL.

What I've faced

My parents are both retired. My father retired from the Army in 2000 after serving 25 years. My mother retired in 2021 after serving nearly 30 years with Customs and Border Protection. My parents decided to have me at a late age; I am the fourth child of five. My older siblings say that I have different parents than they had, and this is true - they saw my parents live check-to-check and eventually witnessed my parents complete their careers. My younger brother Alex and I didn't see my parents struggle financially, rather we saw them become victims of old age and poor health. There is a 38-year age gap between my age and that of my parents.

My earliest memories of my parents were in assisting to take care of them. My three older siblings didn't help much because they had already moved out or left for the military. Since I am older than Alex, I was the one who had to lead by example. In some sense, I felt I had to grow up faster than Alex. By the time he and I were able to understand parts of life, we both were taking care of our parents.

My father fell ill and was diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). With time and each breath, it became harder for my father to breathe. He eventually became dependent on Oxygen machines. During my high school years my father tried actively to be involved in my sports games, but it was difficult for him. The way I told people about my father's condition was imagining this: walking from your bed to the bathroom only to find you were gasping for air. His disease was severe, and it did take an emotional toll on my mother and me. As the older brother, I was expected to help my father while my mother was at work. I was expected to drive him to doctors' appointments. I was expected to help my mother make dinner after work because she was tired too. I was generally expected to do much of the work in my parents' household. Eventually, my father was placed on the waiting list for a transplant as his health degraded, and he moved "higher up" on the list. Witnessing my father become sicker built a feeling of helplessness and a desire to be near his side because of fear of something bad happening while away. I dreamed of attending college out of the city or state, but I didn't.

Who I was

My college journey did not go as planned. During my first year my father got the call for a lung transplant. Our family had been preparing for this moment. I remember I was at

work and within an hour of that call, my father and mother were medically transported by plane to Dallas, Texas to receive his new lungs. The surgery went well. The transplant operation was a new start for our family. But it wasn't a quick ride back home. My parents had to stay about two years in Dallas to be near the physicians in case my father's body rejected the lungs. No physician in our hometown of El Paso, Texas wanted to treat my father because of the severity of the case. It was a major transition for our family because of the expenses. The medical airplane ride to get to Dallas alone cost about \$90,000.

During the two years my parents were in Dallas, I spent having fun, being reckless, and trying to forget about my situation. Unfortunately, the absence of my parents meant the absence of responsibility; I did as I wanted. It was the first time I didn't have to worry about my father's health because he had physicians in Dallas to do that for me. College was one of those things I did because my parents told me I had to do it. I was a decent student in college, I was more content with being free and doing anything that I wanted. School was in the back of my mind. I was focused on having fun, going to work, and helping with some bills at my house. I eventually dropped out of college because I wasn't engaged in education. When my parents would call about school, I lied; and I lied to them for about a year. Eventually, I got tired of lying so I tried going back to school a second time but wasn't successful. I told my parents I needed a break and began working full-time as a security guard at multiple bars and restaurants. At night I would do both security and bartending. Given the industry I was in, school was difficult. Either I was working, or I was sleeping. So, I dropped out a second time, around the time my parents returned from their two years in Dallas.

Who I've become

Eventually, I had to hit my own version of rock bottom to realize that I wanted more for myself. I was working a night shift at my bar job, and was having a friendly conversation with a patron, and he said to me "What are your plans with life? You're too smart to be security at a bar." I reacted like the deer in the headlights. The patron saw my behavior and said, "If you want to try something different, become a volunteer firefighter." And that's what I did, I became a volunteer firefighter. Because that position holds a title and a badge, I realized that working in the bar industry wouldn't be the best decision. By job hunting, I landed a position in a psychiatric hospital working as a technician. Both jobs taught me a lot about human behavior, which led me to reflect more on the hardships I had faced. I learned critical skills through the patients I treated which helped in my self-care and self-respect.

I met my wife during my self-recovery process, and she gave me the grounding support and a home I needed to go back to school a third time. Being out of my parents' household gave me relief and I was able to balance my school and work activities. I had come to understand that my parents' dependency on me and my father's health were affecting my

decision-making. There had been times when I felt guilty for not helping around the house and I would neglect my studies to help with family matters. I know I wasn't doing the smart thing, yet neglecting my studies didn't feel like the right one either. One thing was for certain, removing myself from that environment was a selfish decision that became the best decision for me.

I am now getting my Bachelor's in Biological Science with a Biomedical Concentration. When I started back at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), one of the classes I took was CHEM 1305, the first semester of general chemistry designed for science and engineering majors. I took this class towards the end of the pandemic, so classes were online. But this class was different, it consisted of a lecture and a "workshop," and it stuck out in comparison to all the previous classes I had taken. Workshop in this course has no credit but is integrated into the lecture because the grade for workshop is worth 20% of the lecture grade. The workshop helped and supplemented the lecture. It made chemistry easier. It helped me start to make friends. I hadn't made friends during my freshman and sophomore years because of my disinterest in college. Also, my typical classmates were younger than me. Having classes online did not provide the opportunity to interact meaningfully with other students. My high school friends and I did not stay in contact. We all went our ways as adults. Everybody I had known the first two times in college had graduated. So, on my third attempt, I tried to do college by myself: I studied by myself, ate by myself, and tried to do everything by myself. As you can imagine, being on that path gets lonely and hard. It was an awful time for me, except for my PLTL chemistry experience.

At the point that classes transitioned to in-person, I was registered for CHEM 1306, the second semester of general chemistry. Just like Chemistry 1305, Chemistry 1306 also came with a workshop. When I enrolled in this course, I came with the attitude that this course would be as easy as CHEM 1305. I was wrong, this class proved to be extremely challenging. However, what made this class tolerable was that I was able to interact with people in person and arrange for study sessions with my colleagues. Because of its smaller size, creating a study session with people within the workshop was easier than with lecture classmates. Granted, in a core chemistry course at a large university there are about 300+ students, so there are plenty of people to ask. Or so you would think... Truthfully, it was a bit intimidating for me since most of the freshmen I was around knew each other from high school and I was older. I felt I was an outsider, the old guy going back to college.

Objectively, workshops create a designated space where students and one Peer Leader come together to discuss course material. This time, workshop was more comforting and friendly. My Peer Leader created an inviting, sociable, and tension-free environment that made asking for help from her or other students easy. I got to learn that there were other students with the same "dumb" questions as me. That was a relief because I was happy to know

that I wasn't the only one who was confused. As the semester progressed, periodically my Peer Leader would change the structure of workshop. She provided useful facilitation examples. Sometimes she would put the students in groups to work out problems and it was nice because we had the chance to interact, learn, and teach each other. Sometimes she had activities planned like chemistry-related games that made understanding concepts easier. Or sometimes she would have us present certain topics about the content we were learning by having us make a group presentation with a chemistry problem. Every workshop she led was different. I liked that because each time I was engaged.

What I've been given

Towards the end of that semester, my Peer Leader pitched the opportunity to the workshop students about becoming a Peer Leader. Despite the difficulty of the course, I had a good time taking the class because I had a workshop and people to talk to. Some people might dismiss how important connecting with people in the same class is, but that is what helped me tremendously as a student. The second time I was in a workshop, I loved it. That Peer Leader, the way she handled workshop, is the reason why I wanted to apply. I thought positively about my experience. Engaging with the other students I learned that some of them were taking the same classes as me and this led to more study groups in these other classes. Of importance to mention, there were times that my Peer Leader's friends (other Peer Leaders) would sometimes visit and hang out in our workshop. This provided a super comfortable environment and enhanced workshop because sometimes we also got help from the other Peer Leaders. Over time I lost my paranoia in my age, and I became comfortable with school. Eventually, I made the decision that I wanted to create the same environment that my Peer Leader had established, and I wanted to be a part of that family of learning. I wanted to give future students the resources and opportunities I had had.

As you can guess, I applied, and I am now a Peer Leader. I follow the same workshop styles that my Peer Leader did with me. I have created the workshop protocol that I wanted and that I believe in. To address "What I've been given," my answer is: Much more than I expected, where I did not expect anything. There are also many challenges I never expected. However, I enjoy them, and I like the challenge of educating in chemistry. Moreover, the overall experience I've had has convinced me to pursue a Ph.D. in Chemistry. So, later at whatever university I end up, I would like to carry this program there because I believe in the PLTL program. I would like to create opportunities for future leaders and students.

This program has also allowed me to become an author by making contributions to the workbook as the Lead Peer Leader in charge of oversight of Workbook revisions (Becvar and Saupe, 2021). There are not many of us who can say that they've contributed to an active learning book. Something else that the program did for me was that it gave me friends. This

statement alone holds more value to me because this was something I struggled with, and I received this gift of friends and friendship through my PLTL experience and PLTL family, something described in several previous essays published in *Advances in Peer-Led Learning* (Carreon Morales, 2023; Chavez Saenz, 2022; Marin, 2022; Martinez, 2022; Torres, 2023). PLTL made my undergraduate experience worth it. What I've learned (and this still amazes me) is that this program has many talented individuals with big goals. Being around them, I've learned that I get to be a part of that talent and have bigger goals than I once planned.

What I have come to learn here at UTEP is the PLTL Program and the peer leading community establishes a unique culture. The undergraduate students have similar but different majors and areas of study. Peer Leaders also have many different STEM majors, including engineering, chemistry, biology, biomedical, forensic science, laboratory science, biochemistry, and neurobiology. Even though our majors are different, at some point nearly all the classes we need to take are identical. Study groups come so easily because of the PLTL experience, and because they do, we create our own workshops for the other classes we take in our individual curriculum of study. Another nice factor is that because we all are taking the same classes, we hold each other accountable and ideally, we share the same emotional baggage with classes. This is when I learned what a planner was, and how to use it for time management. The accountability we share led me to become more organized with my activities. We become our own in-school support system.

One of my greatest and most heartfelt memories with my peer leading friends happened this past Spring semester when a dozen of us were taking Mammalian Physiology class together. Seven of us were studying together for an upcoming exam and one Peer Leader shared that she wasn't ready for the exam. She admitted to being so mentally drained from studying and preparing for the GRE (Graduate Record Exam), that she wasn't retaining anything. Then 15 seconds after sharing that, she began crying. Shortly after she let out her tears and expressed herself to the group, she had all the other Peer Leaders crying, and by the shift in energy in the room, I began to cry as well. Now the relevance of this story is that I would never have felt or encountered this kind of interaction if it weren't for the PLTL program. The majority of all the Peer Leaders in our program have big goals, and most of us have those big tests we face; many of us share similar pressures and emotions because we all are on the same journey to achieving our careers. That experience is a core memory that I share with my fellow Peer Leaders, because it provided a moment of vulnerability but somehow, we felt comfort from the shared experience. Corny, but we have each other. Believe it or not, making friends in college makes your experience better. The sharing would not have happened without the PLTL Program. This program gave me what I needed to help me succeed.

What we can create

Peer-Led Team Learning should be available everywhere and for every subject. Politically, there may not be enough funding and maybe too many classes for PLTL in every large undergraduate course. However, I would say it is in the best interest of all colleges and universities to consider and explore having a workshop for many of the more difficult first-year level courses. By having PLTL available to all first-year students this could create higher numbers of succeeding college students because this could start a healthy foundation in student behavior. There are many reasons why students stop going to class and/or drop out. If we can alleviate and identify student problems, students who are like me – those who struggle to find study groups and friends - can find the encouragement they need. Or if a student has the fear of embarrassment or fear of attention for asking questions in lecture, they can go to their Peer Leader and ask. Peer Leaders create that bridge to the professor and give immediate feedback to that professor. We become big brothers or big sisters and give students tools to generally succeed in college by sharing our tips and experiences. I believe that creating this setting and creating these habits builds the foundation of good students.

So, why does PLTL matter? It matters because it creates opportunities for all parties: professors, Peer Leaders, and students. It gives opportunities to create friendships, memories, and tie in students of different backgrounds. It relieves emotional distress by creating small support groups at school. It establishes a safe place for students to dissect their comprehension of the material. It allows students to engage in active learning. Lastly, this program has the ability to shape students into better students. I'd say I am the result of this program.

Conclusion

My plan after I graduate is to transition into being a paid Firefighter for the City of El Paso, Texas. I plan on sending my wife back to school for her Masters, then after she's done, I will return to school to get my Ph.D. in Chemistry and do as I said.

Finally, as a student about to graduate, I want to leave my mark because this is my story. Every Peer Leader has a story that pertains to "why" they do it and what they've been given. Who I have become as a result of this program is a Peer Leader who wants to give back to the people that I surround myself with and who surround me. I want to share my experience with everybody of what this program has given me and what it can possibly give others too. These words are heartfelt, because I now am the result of the PLTL program in chemistry at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Peer-Led Team Learning makes an impression on students and has unlimited capabilities. If this is something that has happened to me, who is to say that it cannot happen to others? My essay achieves the desire to share a story I believe is important (Becvar, 2023). We can create opportunities for future students with PLTL.

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Figure 1. Francisco Xavier Baca

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