

Great Expectations Speeches, April 24, 2024

Johanna Rodriguez, LEAP Alumna:

I would like to share my story with you which is a typical story for LEAP's students - one of a 14-year immigrant teen, finding her way in a new country.

It was 2006 when I first came to Salem with my mother and my brother to visit family. Although it was not originally in the plan, my mother made the sacrifice to allow me to stay when she and my brother returned to the Dominican Republic so that I could have better educational opportunities. My brother eventually immigrated to the U.S after graduating high school, enrolled at LEAP and is now a Salem police officer. I am so proud of my family and grateful they are both here tonight. (pause).

While separated from my family, I was able to depend on the many cousins and aunts living in the Salem area and they introduced me to LEAP which will always be Salem CyberSpace to my family. I was 14 years old and about to enter Salem High School as a freshman and LEAP became my safe space - a place to get homework help, learn English, make new friends and learn computer skills. My home away from home.

At LEAP, I grew up, regained my confidence, and began to shape my future. Learning English in 4 years so I could go to college was a challenge I had to tackle, and I did so with hard work and with the help of LEAP staff. I took advantage of every program they had to not only learn English but to do better academically and find my pathway to college and then a career.

I remember being discouraged when I found out I would need to do remedial courses at North Shore Community College. So in my own stubborn, determined way, I decided to complete my remedial courses the summer before freshman year so I could start the fall with all college-level courses.

Through my own hard study and with help from my LEAP advisors, I graduated in two years – the first in my family to get a college degree. I then transferred to Northeastern University on a full tuition scholarship. Two years later, I completed my Bachelors degree and then enrolled at Salem State University to get my Masters in Social Work. After graduating in 2019 I earned my licensed certificate in Social Work.

Now as a licensed social worker, I better understand the emotional adjustment I was dealing with. It is hard enough being a teenager but to be an immigrant teenager is even harder. I look back and remember a scared, moody teen with, **OK I admit it**, an attitude. It was my personal experiences, the new skills I learned in school and college, and my LEAP mentors that provided the path to become a City Connects Coordinator and Guidance Counselor at Collins Middle School in Salem. In this role, I work with 8th grade students, some of whom are English learners, who, just like me 18 years ago, are finding their place in the world, anxious about entering high school, building their agency and wanting to do right by their families who sacrificed so much.

I encourage all my students to enroll in LEAP's middle school program, Expanding Horizons, because I know once they are in the LEAP pipeline from middle school through to a career, they will be in a safe and supportive environment with adults who recognize each student's unique skills and help them build that education and career plan. I often share with my students and families my experiences not only as a LEAP alum but also as an immigrant in hopes that they feel connected and represented—**something that was not possible for me while I was in high school**. It gives me great pride and satisfaction when parents and caregivers express their appreciation for my support because through my job I am able to connect them and their students to the same services that got me here today. And, for families like my own, I can provide this support in their native language of Spanish—something that was not always possible for my family when I was in school.

In closing, I would like to take an opportunity to recognize three special people who, as LEAP volunteers, mentored and tutored me during my most vulnerable years ... as I say

your name, please stand, I want everyone to know who you are.... – Kelly Quinn, a volunteer while a student at SSU and now a Social Worker in Salem Public Schools and my colleague, has been my mentor and role model to this day. Jean Cocuzzo, a retired teacher, and Ron Landman, a former teacher and retired middle school principal, who coached me through high school and years in college.. (Ron also helped my brother Jonathan). **Thank you all.**

I also want to say thank you to those of you in the audience today who are mentors, partners and volunteers. I encourage you to continue to do this work because I know firsthand the power it brings. And–if you have not yet–I encourage you to join us going forward.

Thank you.

Kelly Legere and Dr. Christine Valdes, Career Mentor-Mentee speakers

My name is Kelly Legere. I am 18 years old and a high school senior at Essex Tech. This Fall I will be a first-generation college freshman. I am here to talk to you about my experiences with LEAP and how they have helped me to be the person I am today.

I first became involved in LEAP through Expanding Horizons when I was a middle schooler. I loved my time at Expanding Horizons because I got homework help, did fun activities such as hip-hop dance, acapella, arts & crafts plus so much more, and made lifelong friends who are still my friends to this day.

After graduating from middle school and Expanding Horizons in 2020, I continued with LEAP as part of the Summer Work Program. During my three years in this Program, I have really enjoyed being paired with mentors in career fields that I am interested in. I am still in contact with some of my past mentors. The Summer Work Program has also helped me a lot with my public speaking and networking abilities. These things used to be really hard for me, but I have noticed a lot of improvement! Just being here today is proof of that!

I live in Salem with my mom and my two siblings- I'm the oldest! My little sister Zoey is 10 and will be joining LEAP's programs for the first time this summer. My little brother Patrick, who is 9, has a rare condition called Prader-Willi Syndrome. This syndrome causes the brain to not recognize when the stomach is full, so people with Prader-Willi syndrome constantly feel hungry. It also causes some developmental delays. Growing up with my brother and watching his experiences made me want to understand this condition more as well as raise more awareness about it.

During last summer's Summer Work Program, I asked to be paired with someone from the medical community. My mentor was Christine, a physician at North Shore Physicians Group. A big part of the Summer Work Program is working on a summer-long project with your mentor. Christine and I quickly decided that my project would be on Prader-Willi Syndrome. I chose this topic because I wanted to understand it better and be able to share my findings with others.

Christine helped me find resources and information that would have been more difficult for me to find on my own. Christine had actually seen a couple of patients with this syndrome and was able to share her views as a physician. While working on the research, Christine was able to help me organize my ideas and translate them into a complete presentation. Through this experience I learned so much about this condition. I was able to make connections between what I saw in the research and my own experiences with my brother.

Christine came in person to see me present. It felt really good to be able to show her what we had created together and that her time and effort as a mentor had a positive impact. My mother, sister, and brother attended the project showcase during the final week of the program. I was so proud to show them what I worked on, and I felt that I had gained a closer understanding of my brother's experiences.

After the summer ended, I re-joined LEAP's College Success Program, and through their support I have submitted over 20 college applications and I have received 11

acceptances so far, and right now I'm deciding where I want to commit to. I know I want to pursue a pre-med track and ultimately go to medical school to study Neurology. My experiences with LEAP have helped me build my skills, helped me prepare for life beyond middle school and high school. It solidified my interest in medicine and brain science. LEAP has helped me plan for the future in a way that I don't think I would have gotten anywhere else.

Thank you so much for being here and supporting LEAP programs.

I would now like to introduce my mentor, Dr. Christine Valdes, Family physician and medical site coordinator at North Shore Physicians Group in Saugus.

Dr. Christine Valdes

For the past three years, I've had the privilege of being a LEAP career mentor.

However, my connection with LEAP actually began four years ago. Back then, during the height of the pandemic, I delivered informational talks about COVID and the vaccine to LEAP families. I also held virtual discussions with students interested in healthcare.

These discussions gave me the chance to share my educational and career story, answering their questions about the healthcare field.

But in 2021, when life opened back up, I welcomed my first summer mentee. Working with LEAP and these inspiring students has been a truly rewarding experience.

Working with students like Kelly is incredibly rewarding. It's a two-way street. While I shared my knowledge and guided her project on Prader-Willi Syndrome, I also learned a great deal from her experience. Through her, I gained a deeper understanding of the condition and, more importantly, the profound impact it has on families. Her unwavering

desire to enter a field that can help not only her brother but others facing similar challenges is heartwarming.

Being a first-generation college student myself, I understand the challenges of navigating higher education and career paths without guidance. My parents, though incredibly supportive, couldn't offer much help because they hadn't gone through those experiences themselves. The healthcare field was entirely new territory for our family. I went through college and even medical school quite blindfolded.

It wasn't until after my residency, when I was already practicing as a doctor, that a senior physician offered to mentor me. While I'm grateful for that guidance, I always wished I'd had someone like that earlier on. Someone to answer my questions, guide my choices, and perhaps even help me avoid quite a few stumbles.

This desire to help others navigate their journeys, particularly when it comes to college, medical school, specialty choices and health care careers other than being a clinician, is what truly motivates me as a mentor. I want students to know the options that exist for them, something I wish I had known earlier.

In the past, I've tried to mentor, but scheduling in-person meetings consistently was difficult. LEAP's hybrid program, with its mix of in-person and virtual sessions, has been fantastic. It allows for the flexibility I and other professionals need to find time for our mentees around very busy professional and family lives. So many of my colleagues are now able to find the time to act as mentors that would not have been able to in the past due to time constraints.

Being a LEAP mentor goes beyond simply sharing knowledge. It's about offering support, encouragement, and a listening ear to these students. It's a chance to give

back and ensure the next generation has a smoother, more informed journey than mine. This experience has inspired me to encourage everyone to consider mentoring. Just an hour a week can make a significant difference. You can guide a student, share your knowledge, and provide the kind of support some may not have the privilege of receiving. Thank you

Linda Saris, Executive Director:

The theme of this year's event is the Power of Partnerships. I hope you have all figured that out by now. So it is serendipitous that this is also National Volunteer Week. Therefore, let me start by thanking all the volunteers here today for your service. This event salutes you all.

Funders almost always ask about partnerships. Why? Because partnerships speak to community, sustainability, efficiency, increased social impact and enhanced mission awareness.

We are a growing organization serving over 600 youth per year. Yet we are only a team of 28, 20 who work directly with the programs. We have to constantly remind ourselves what our core competencies are ...and, especially what they are not. If there are organizational or student needs that do not fall within one of our core competencies, we go outside the organization. It is wasteful to reinvent the wheel, you can't ignore the need, nor do we want to serve up one-size-fits all programs which violates one of our core values of personalized learning. The answer is partnering.

But partnering is not easy – partners must maintain common purpose and be willing to equally contribute resources – and this is exactly why this year we have funded a FT volunteer and partnership coordinator, Caitlynn Almy. She has a big job. In 2023, we had 165 volunteers and 34 partner organizations, and the numbers are growing.

Working on the North Shore we have communities rich with organizations and professionals with a vast array of content knowledge they have to share – **just look at who is at your table and around the room.** These shared resources, knowledge, time and, yes, sometimes money, help to bridge the opportunity gap for underserved, yet highly deserving and talented, youth.

Because of partnerships with organizations like the Lynn Museum and PEM, students see themselves as artists.

Because of Salem Sound Coastwatch and Change is Simple our students interact with nature and begin to see themselves as environmental guardians.

And, with partners like the Latino STEM Alliance, and our two awardees tonight combined with field trips to businesses like Google and Boston Dynamics, our students can see themselves as engineers and scientists.

My MBA education taught me that businesses must maximize profits and return on investment for their stockholders. So why do so many businesses want to partner with LEAP? Because it can improve the bottom line by filling the talent pipeline (much needed here in Massachusetts, if you saw the recent report from the Pioneer Institute about the brain drain among 22 - 45 year olds), and research shows that philanthropy

engages and retains employees. At the same time, corporate philanthropy helps scores of underserved youth find and leverage new resources and social connections.

Our schools are vital partners providing facilities, curriculum help, teachers and coaches. We co-write grants together, strategize, and collaborate on ways to bridge after-school and in-school. High school and college and college and career. And, as a result, our students become more engaged learners.

Because of Salem State University and our 5-year partnership in the Early College programs, our high school students see themselves as college students. With Salem State we have worked on summer English Learner academies, Saturday STEM programs for girls and most recently our summer paid career mentoring for 100 youth and their mentors which runs on SSU's campus and employs SSU students.

Because of volunteer based organizations like CCT, Catchafire, ESC, Lawyers Clearinghouse to name a few, LEAP staff can tap into pro-bono services in marketing, strategic planning, legal and other skills that we don't have in-house. And with city-wide alliances like the Lynn Education District and the Salem Children's Alliance, we participate in a brain trust that makes our organizations and missions stronger.

HOW CAN WE MEASURE THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS - HOW ABOUT THIS?

98% of LEAP students graduate high school on time, 92% enroll in college (2x the state average), 69% complete college (2.5 x) and for students who join our college advising program at least through freshman year, that number rises to 91% (4x the state average).

Now that is the power of partnerships.

Social change does not exist in silos. To be an engine for social change, and social and economic upward mobility for all students, LEAP needs all of you.

The eclipse earlier this month offered us, a divided nation, a moment of unity. Tonight **let's unify.....** Unify around access to quality education and social and economic upward mobility, please make a gift or sign up TONIGHT to be a volunteer or partner or do both. We are recruiting Summer career mentors now – only 1 hour per week (virtual and/or in person) - information is on the tables. That's an easy ask, isn't it?... it's for our kids and the health of our community.

Thank you.