

Final Great Expectations 2025 Remarks by: Kelly Santana King, LEAP Alumna

Today, I am a Principal Automation Engineer at Raytheon's Missiles and Defense Division. To qualify for this career, I graduated from Northeastern University with a bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering – debt-free I might add. After working in the field for a year, I discovered a passion for automation and returned to Northeastern at night, earning my master's degree in Computer Science.

Now let me tell you how I went from being a 13-year old immigrant from the Dominican Republic in 2008 who spoke no English to my position today as an engineer and your emcee for the evening. I first heard about LEAP from my older brother. At the time, LEAP was this mysterious place where my brother disappeared after school and didn't emerge until well after dark. One day, I was sent to get him, and as I stood there waiting, Linda approached me and invited me to come do my homework. And with that simple invitation, LEAP transformed from my brother's hiding place into my own refuge.

Throughout my time at LEAP, so many LEAP staff became pillars of support for my family and me. Linda guided my family through the American school system, helping us navigate standardized testing and introducing me to the college process. I grew up at LEAP, learning English in LEAP's ESL program, learning about computers and getting academic help. My very first job was in a summer program at LEAP where I got paid to design websites as part of a youth design team.

When we moved to Lynn during my sophomore year of high school, Linda personally arranged for my brother and me to finish the year at our current schools and then helped enroll us in our new ones.

Shoutout to Molly Cohen Molly was my guidance counselor - now she is Deputy Superintendent in Lynn - look how much we both grew!.

When I got to college, LEAP provided me with mentors who supported me academically, emotionally, and even mentally, making sure I had everything I needed to succeed. Jesenia helped with all 16 of

my college applications and personally proofread every single essay I wrote. The level of care she showed made me feel like getting me into college was her personal and only mission, even though I knew she was helping a dozen other students just as much. Then there was Ron Landmin (shoutout), a former teacher and retired middle school principal, who, as a volunteer, took me under his wing as I worked on my college personal essay. He didn't just proofread my writing, he coached me through the process of putting my experiences into words, helping me craft my story in a way that made me tear up reading it. When my immigration status made it seem like I wouldn't be able to afford college, Linda made a personal appeal to Dr. Meservey, the president of Salem State University at the time, and helped me secure in-state tuition.

When I decided to pursue engineering, Jesenia supported me through the transfer process to Northeastern and helped me obtain scholarships and a full ride. During my time in college, there were many mentors who helped me stay organized, and who provided me with the tools to keep track of important deadlines. But more than anything, they were always there to listen. Whether I needed to vent about something as silly as my disappointment over the ending of *How I Met Your Mother* or discuss serious family struggles, they were there to listen, empathize, but most importantly, keep me on track. There are so many more mentors who have made a difference in my life. People like Kayla, who helped me with homework almost daily, or Kelly Quinn, whose personal volunteer experiences always inspired me to do more. And that support didn't end when I graduated. To this day, I still call Linda for advice when I'm considering new job opportunities or need guidance on handling challenges at work.

I had always been a good student in DR and here, but through LEAP, I was able to advance my academic knowledge, professional skills, and personal resilience. But the most valuable lesson I learned was the power of mentorship in a young person's life. My experience with my LEAP mentors has inspired me to pay forward everything I've received. While in college, I volunteered in LEAP's college success program at Salem High. When I transferred to Northeastern and could no longer volunteer at LEAP, I became a Big Sister.

Looking back, I firmly believe my life could have taken a very different path without my LEAP mentors. I can say with absolute certainty that because of my LEAP mentors my life changed for the better, and for that, I will always be grateful. I urge all of you to consider becoming a LEAP mentor - you can change many lives in the same way my life was changed.

Thank you

Remarks by Cynthia Orellana, CEO of Mass Mentoring Partnership

Opening & Gratitude:

On behalf of Mass Mentoring Partnership - Thank you so much for this incredible honor. It is truly humbling for us at MMP to be recognized by LEAP4Education for the work we are doing to support young people and mentoring programs across Massachusetts. Shout out to some of the MMP team who are joining me here tonight, Beth Fraster, Lauren McCabe, and Hannah St. Laurent!

I also want to take a moment to personally thank Linda for her relentless love and commitment to the youth of Salem, Lynn, and Peabody, which led me to want to support the work of this fantastic organization way back when. And, to say how proud I am of Representative Cruz, who was in high school when I met him while in my role at the Department of Higher Education. I'm excited to see all that he will continue to do.

So, being here with you tonight, feels like a full circle moment and I am so grateful for you all.

Why Mentoring Matters:

As we all know, every young person deserves the opportunity to succeed. However, too many face barriers that limit their access to education, career pathways, and social support. Mentoring is a critical tool in helping young people overcome these challenges. Strong mentoring relationships provide guidance, encouragement, and access to resources that help youth thrive academically, prepare for their careers, and make positive life choices. And, the most meaningful mentoring relationships build from young people's strengths and help disrupt deficit narratives that question what they are capable of.

Without mentorship, many students struggle with academic success and career readiness. Too often, young people lack access to role models and professional networks, and the opportunity gaps

widen, particularly for systematically marginalized youth. Without mentorship, communities miss out on a generation of leaders, workers, and engaged citizens.

Personal Experience & Connection to Mentoring:

As a first-generation Latina college student, I understand firsthand the power of mentorship. Though it came later in college, I had the privilege of being mentored by individuals who helped me navigate the complexities of higher education and career paths that, as a first-gen Student of Color, felt overwhelming and out of reach. The guidance and encouragement I received was invaluable as I sought to find my place in institutions where few

people looked like me — and, from someone who truly understood the struggles I was facing. That support not only helped me graduate (and with multiple degrees) but also prepared me for a career where I can be part of creating access and opportunity, and transforming lives by helping others achieve that which often feels unimaginable to kids like me.

This personal experience connects deeply with the work we're doing at MMP and with partners, like LEAP4Education. When we provide mentorship, we're not just empowering students get to and through school. We're setting them up for long-term success in their personal, academic, and professional journeys.

Our Collaboration with LEAP4Education & the Broaded Impact of Mentoring:

Through our partnerships with organizations like

LEAP4Education, we are able to amplify the impact of mentoring, helping students like Manny (and countless others) stay in school, graduate, and access college and career opportunities. We help young professionals gain the mentorship and networks needed for workforce success, and we support youth organizations in running sustainable mentoring programs.

Closing Remarks:

Thank you again for this honor. It's been a privilege to collaborate with LEAP4Education in supporting the next generation of leaders. We look forward to continuing this journey together, making an even greater impact on the lives of young people across our state.

Remarks by Linda Saris, Executive Director - GX 2025

As you heard from our alum and speakers here tonight in person and on video, mentoring is powerful but what it delivers is magical. Mentoring helps our students to engage in learning, expand their social and professional networks and develop socially and emotionally so that they can achieve their career goals.

Many of us in the room had our parents as our mentors. I know I did. Parents provide the foundation and shape our values. However, as we grow, we can also benefit greatly from non-parental mentors, people outside our echo chambers – a teacher, a coach, an employer – who can introduce us to new ways of thinking, and challenge us. Who can, when we need it, just listen.

Who amongst us here hasn't turned to someone outside our families when navigating a tough decision or moment of doubt? Even with the most supportive parents in the world there are those things you don't want to share with them at first. – perhaps you don't want to disappoint or anger them. Or at the other end of the spectrum, you are not looking for them to fix it, at least not yet. It may be a time when you need space to process before seeking solutions. You are just looking for someone who isn't as emotionally invested to listen. That's where mentoring shines. It's not instead of family – it's alongside. A powerful addition to a young person's circle of support.

Mentorship is particularly beneficial to at-risk youth who with guidance from a mentor are 52% less likely to skip school and 55% more likely to attend college. In research on youth, from all economic backgrounds, having access to non-parent mentorship was a common thread in stories of successful people.

By forming trusted relationships with other adults and peers, our youth will learn how to ask for help without shame, to seek and welcome other opinions and feedback, to become more independent, by building self-efficacy and self-confidence.

You heard that loud and clear tonight from Kelly and in our video interviews with Kevin, Manny and Shaely. They talk about building resiliency, resourcefulness, making connections, opening up opportunities, building a career and postsecondary choices. All of these remarkable young adults were talented youth coming into LEAP, Manny with his precocious communication skills and a sense of fairness, who finally figured out how to put them to good and positive use as a public servant, and Kelly, who was always a hard and conscientious worker and great at math who needed guidance with the college process and making career decisions and now a senior automation engineer. Both Kelly and Manny needed social-emotional guidance as teens as they dealt with difficult family issues. And Kevin, who you heard from in the video, was always a tinkerer, soaking up all he could learn about computers, now a senior programmer. Andrison was another great student and he found

his way to teaching, in part, through his work at LEAP. LEAP was there for them and now they are all there for LEAP. Many kids who are mentored show an interest in becoming mentors themselves. That is certainly true for Manny, Kelly, Kevin and Andrison.

In a 2019 Psychology Today article it was reported that mentoring relationships were most successful when mentors saw themselves as listeners, encouragers and co-learners. And I want to emphasize that last point – co-learners. As a mentor you will learn from your mentee and most enjoyably, learn together.

Mentoring is a 2-way street. Being a mentor is rewarding, impactful, empowering. Everyone in this room has the social capital and ability to be a mentor.

This summer, we will be looking to find and train 50 career mentors for teens in grades 9 – 12 willing to provide 60 - 90 minutes of mentoring a week for 6 weeks. These relationships which will take place virtually or in person, will guide youth in self-reflection, career-connected learning and building career skills. Joining our summer mentoring program will give your mentee the opportunity to begin to create a vision or a blueprint for their future. If you can make a connection with a young person, the impact is truly magical for your student and for you.

Thank you.

Before Representative Cruz speaks, I must address the unprecedented challenges facing non-profits today. I am sure you have read about this in the news. In 23 years since founding LEAP, we have navigated post-9/11, the 2008 recession, and COVID. During each of these periods LEAP has survived and even thrived. From 2020 - 2023, LEAP grew in excess of 50% with COVID-era funding, from 400 to 625 youth, helping our students to stay connected, overcome learning loss and mental health issues and to stay on course towards graduation and their futures.

But today a perfect storm is hitting us: COVID-era funding has ended, inflation persists, the stock market is volatile and federal cuts loom.

As funding decreases, learning loss persists as does the mental health crises exacerbated by social media, and social and economic anxieties. Reduced government services will disproportionately impact the immigrant community and our low-income families, thus threatening our future workforce and economic stability by widening the opportunity gap that LEAP programs work so hard to narrow.

I'm no alarmist, but a realist and a problem-solver. As always, we will meet today's challenges with thoughtful consideration, innovation, creativity and community. We will prioritize youth workforce development and mentoring as our two focus areas, both of which address our students' needs. To

do this we will invest in our highly professional staff and technology to keep our students on track to achieving their education and career goals. We are also building LEAP's volunteer ranks and pursuing Mass Service Alliance best-in-class volunteer certification to ensure quality services and to increase mentorship opportunities for our youth. Our past fiscal prudence and current cash reserves, which we have built over the last 10 years, provide us an important, but temporary buffer, giving us some time to respond to the changing funding climate. But there is no doubt that we will need the help of private philanthropy to weather this perfect storm.

With a new and energized development team, we are also exploring new ways to fundraise and tonight you will get to experience one of those changes which is why we will be doing our first raise-the-paddle to raise needed funds for our mentoring programs. We will depend on our collective resilience, creativity and our generosity. Your support is important to LEAP today but, more importantly, it is an investment in the future of our youth. They are our kids, our community, our future workforce. Thank you!

So with that, it is my pleasure to introduce a person many of you in the audience already know, Representative Manny Cruz who will lead the raise the paddle to raise needed funds for our mentoring and workforce development programs. I have known Manny and almost his entire family since he was 11– over 20 years. He has grown from the adorable but too often angry tween to the accomplished public servant and family man he is today. I could go on and on about Manny but I have talked enough. Suffice it to say, I, as Manny's mentor and he as mine, neither would have been the same without the other. So it is with great pleasure I introduce mijó, Representative Manny Cruz.

Ending speech to close the night.

Thank you to our magical staff, the mighty 27 of us, Board and volunteers (should I ask them to stand).

I also want to thank Kelly and Manny for their inspiring remarks, David Silva and Paul Tucker for making our first paddle raise such a success. Thank you to Dr Jean Rhodes for her contribution to our video and the time she has taken with me to help me better understand the true value of mentoring and the research behind it as only an academic can do.

Now for some end of event housekeeping.

For those who gave mentor or mentee testimonials tonight, we will be collating and editing all the testimonials into a short video which will be shared out over social media and constant contact. Thank you for participating and hopefully it brought back positive memories and inspired an interest in mentoring.

The auction will stay live through Saturday at 5 pm. The QR Code at the table will take you there but you can also link from our website.

We have recorded your numbers through the two raise-the-paddles. If you want to check out tonight, please drop by our registration desk and someone can accept cash, check or credit card. If you prefer to pay this out of a DAF or other means, someone will be in touch to arrange your preferred method of payment.

If you raised your paddle to learn more about becoming a mentor someone will be in touch.

Thank you for attending tonight, sharing your mentoring experiences and your generosity.