1. Tell us about your experiences as a New American. Whether as an immigrant yourself, or as a child of immigrants, how have your experiences as a New American informed and shaped who you are and your accomplishments? (?)

The breeze in Vietnam’s Central Highlands is the first hint of spring. In March 1975, it thickened into the roar of tanks. As the North advanced, my grandfather—who had served in the South Vietnamese army—ran with my newborn mother in his arms. A shell burst nearby, burning her face. Believing she had died, my grandparents slipped to a riverbank to bury her unseen. My grandfather lifted a canteen from a fallen U.S. soldier and poured water over her face in baptism. She blinked.

Survival didn’t bring safety. Because of his service and our family’s Catholic faith, they were persecuted, and my grandfather spent nearly a decade in a re-education camp. My mother left school around middle school to support the family, working as a maid and eating scraps from the plates she served. Years later, the United States opened a lifeline through Hạt Ô—the Humanitarian Operation—offering families like mine a narrow door, a second chance to begin again in America.

Immigration, to my family, meant letting go of what was for what could be. My mother’s courage in rebuilding our lives taught me that resilience isn’t abstract—it’s the daily act of refusing to give up. I watched her navigate housing forms and public-assistance offices, translating for her even when I barely understood the words myself. She balanced two jobs and stretched food stamps; she’d come home late, use her tip money and Burger King coupons so we could share a warm meal together, and only then would we sit at the kitchen table to study for her citizenship test—me, a fifth-grader translating the branches of government for someone who had last studied at my age. She would say, “Cúi đầu là sách vở, ngẩng đầu là tương lai”—look down to study, look up to your future—and through grit and grace, she became a U.S. citizen.

Her journey made me a living witness to the realization of my mother’s American Dream. I didn’t earn this path alone—it was paved by her courage and by the collective memory of those who ran, rebuilt, and believed. That awareness anchors how I see my education: not as personal success, but as a responsibility to help others find their way forward. To me, being a New American means carrying the weight of that inheritance and turning gratitude into service.

As America was my mother’s refuge, school became mine. I looked forward to our weekly library trips, where we each picked out a book to read. One afternoon, I wandered to the space shelf, picked up a book about the Moon, and was hooked. Within weeks I had finished volumes on the planets, the Sun, and asteroids. When my school’s curriculum offered little on space, my English teacher stepped in—encouraging me to take advanced classes and showing me how to find scholarships. That mentorship mattered in a community where few students applied to four-year universities. I chose Iowa State University—close enough to support my family yet far enough to grow. A full scholarship lifted the financial weight from my mother and let me focus. I became the first in my family to earn a college degree, a milestone grounded in her persistence, my teachers’ faith, and my own discipline. I learned that every breakthrough begins with someone believing in your potential.

I’ve always been fascinated by space. When I first reached out to a professor researching spacecraft trajectory optimization, I hadn’t even taken an orbital-mechanics class. Still, he believed in my potential and invited me to join his team for the Global Trajectory Optimization Competition. That experience introduced me to the beauty of astrodynamics—and to the transformative power of mentorship. Someone’s belief in me sparked a purpose far greater than technical curiosity: a desire to guide others the way I was guided.

Entering my first year of graduate school at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, I had no funding, so I worked two jobs while taking five classes to make ends meet and finish faster—landing on academic probation with a 2.78. As a New American and the first in my family to attend graduate school, I was determined to succeed. I thought of my mother rebuilding from nothing in a country where she didn’t know the language—working two jobs, opening a nail salon, and becoming a U.S. citizen. With her strength and perseverance, I rose to a 3.66 and carried that lesson into my current graduate program at the University of New Mexico, where I stand at a 3.94. I learned firsthand that perseverance isn’t just endurance; it’s turning difficulty into direction.

That lesson became the foundation of how I serve others. As an Engineering Career Peer, I mentor students who, like me, have stumbled on their path. I help them navigate résumés, mock interviews, and offer negotiations—guiding them not just toward opportunities, but toward confidence. Many have gone on to secure internships, full-time offers, and graduate admissions. I also taught high-school math and served as a Youth Development Professional at the Boys & Girls Club, where I led computer-literacy and STEM programs for students who reminded me of my younger self—curious, hopeful, and in need of someone to believe in them.

Because of my mother’s grit and sacrifice, I’ve been able to pursue opportunities she could only dream of. I have worked across the country—at startups, a UARC, an FFRDC, and a major aerospace prime—supporting missions at Blue Origin, MIT Lincoln Laboratory, Space Dynamics Laboratory, Blue Canyon Technologies, and Varda Space Industries. Each role deepened my technical understanding but, more importantly, strengthened my conviction to give back. Through programs like Club for the Future and Lincoln Laboratory Educate, I design K–12 workshops to help students see themselves in STEM. My graduate research now explores how assessment design in rocketry education can lift student confidence and learning—work that allows me to mentor undergraduates as they build and launch model rockets of their own.

Gratitude, for a New American, is never passive—it demands motion. My family’s journey taught me that opportunity matters only when it’s shared, a conviction that has carried me beyond the lab through outreach with Club for the Future and Lincoln Laboratory Educate, mentoring undergraduates in my rocketry-education research, and designing programs that help students who’ve never seen themselves in STEM begin to do so. I intend to pursue a Ph.D. that unites engineering and education—to make space more accessible, both in orbit and here on Earth, by widening who gets to participate. My family’s story began with survival; mine continues with the responsibility to turn that survival into service. My mother’s perseverance made my path possible; my task is to widen it for those who come next—helping others not only reach safety, but reach potential, giving more families their own boarding passes to the future. That is the work I will devote my life to: using my training as an engineer and educator to open doors, fund chances, and mentor students where I once stood—turning gratitude into action. It is the promise Paul and Daisy Soros made real for generations of immigrants, and the promise I intend to keep.

1. Tell us about your current and near-term career-related activities and goals, as well as why you decided to pursue the specific graduate program(s) and school(s) that you have. (?)

I’m building flight-ready autonomy for spacecraft—tools that answer “Where am I? Where am I going? How do I get there?” across LEO, cislunar, and deep-space regimes. Near-term, my PhD will focus on three pillars: (1) **online trajectory optimization** for real-time replanning, (2) **adaptive, model-compensating state estimation** that remains accurate under uncertainty and across orbit regimes, and (3) **robust, model-free disturbance rejection** for flexible modes, propellant slosh, and unmodeled dynamics. I’ll take each from **high-fidelity simulation → software test → hardware-in-the-loop**, targeting publishable results (2–3 first-author papers) and a CubeSat-class demo validated against explicit navigation-error thresholds. Long-term, I aim to release **open-source GNC infrastructure**—trajectory planning, adaptive navigation, and robust control—plus shared protocols for rendezvous, deorbit, and traffic management, so universities, startups, and agencies can adopt, certify, and extend reliable autonomy at lower cost.

I’m pursuing Stanford Aeronautics & Astronautics to work in the **Space Rendezvous Laboratory (SLAB)** with Prof. Simone D’Amico. SLAB’s mission squarely matches my focus: **astrodynamics + GNC + environment characterization + decision-making** to enable **distributed space systems** (formation flying, swarms), with rigorous validation via hardware-in-the-loop and flight demos. SLAB work includes autonomous multi-satellite navigation using only onboard vision (StarFOX/Starling), demonstrating the kind of field-validated autonomy I want to help push forward. Stanford is also a strong fit for my mentoring goals. Its **AIM (Asian American Interactive Mentoring)** program pairs undergraduates with grad students, faculty, staff, and alumni for one-on-one mentorship attentive to cultural context—I plan to serve as a mentor and channel my experiences as a first-gen New American into practical guidance on research, internships, and graduate pathways. Within Aero/Astro, additional mentoring and exposure pipelines connect students to research and graduate preparation—structures I’ll plug into to keep widening access to space careers.

In parallel with research, I’ll continue hands-on education and outreach (building on my rocketry-assessment redesign and K-12/classroom visits) by developing classroom-ready modules that mirror my lab work—e.g., small-sat testbeds for vision-based navigation and disturbance rejection—so students from under-resourced backgrounds can touch autonomy, not just read about it. Pairing **open tools** with **open teaching** is central to my plan: progress scales when others can build on it. Stanford’s SLAB gives me the research home to make flight-credible autonomy real; the AIM ecosystem and student-support pipelines give me a way to make the path behind me clearer for those coming next.