My interest in the biology field began in elementary school when my biology teacher taught my class genetics. My mind was immediately taken over by this idea that something so tiny, known as DNA, wrote everything that is alive the way a writer writes a book; the color of an animal’s fur, the shape of the pedals on a flower, and so on. This new-found wonder was never nurtured, and inevitably I lost interest as I grew into my teens. The combination of my parents always working, and living in an anger infested ghetto caused me to pursue social bonds through undesirable means. I come from a place where your focus is on survival, not academics. If you’re sad, you’re seen as weak, afraid you are stepped on and used, the happy are targets to release some built-up anger upon. I knew I couldn’t focus on myself in a place where my entire mindset is ruled by survival from the angry. This is a place where anger reigns, all everyone knows is hunger and pain.

I joined the Air Force to escape the monotonous cycle of poor choices leading to a lifetime of frustration. I was suddenly immersed in the structured environment that I had not realized I had been missing until now. I took out a childhood’s worth of anger and frustration on my training, and quickly found myself excelling in my role as a military policeman. However, the Air Force finds its strength in the cognitive abilities of their Airmen. For the first time in my life, I found myself enjoying my studies, constantly looking for the next opportunity to prove myself academically.

     Upon completion of my training, I was stationed at Laughlin AFB, where I had to mature quickly due to the nature of my job. Alongside my peers, I oversaw the Air Force’s busiest airfield while also enforcing the laws that govern all military bases. With its unique location by the Mexican border I also assisted with U.S. Border Patrol with the capture of drug mules transporting hundreds of pounds of marijuana and cocaine across the border. After a year, I was given the chance to volunteer for my first deployment to the United Arab Emirates. My initial fears were outweighed by my desire to see the world.

In the UAE, I quickly found myself succeeding in many different circumstances. After a series of promotions, I was eventually chosen to be a member of the first joint UAE-US swat team. Communication amongst the team was difficult, but we quickly adopted a makeshift sign-language program that rapidly bonded the team. I cannot believe that we are able to foster an environment of reliance on one another to accomplish harrowing tasks like clearing buildings and engaging active shooters.

After a couple of years back home I promoted and took on more responsibility as the bases 911 operator but I wanted to venture off into new countries. A tasking came down from headquarters to deploy to Saudi Arabia. A thirteen-man team was to go to a compound called Eskan Village. The mission was to protect Americans who were training Saudi Arabian military and protect visiting Saudi Arabian kings, sheiks, princes, and officials. I volunteered as soon as I heard about it and got the machine gunner spot on the team. Having just ranked up I was chosen to be a fire team leader. A fire team leader leads a four-man team and relays all information to the Flight Chief which oversees all base security. Luckily the only thing that went wrong on that deployment happened off-base and was more related to Sharia law.

In Saudi Arabia, women must be covered from head to toe in hijab and are only allowed to show their face unless the man of the house says to cover more. One day off we were offered a chance to shop at a mall with a security escort team. Having to see the people and country with my own eyes I jumped at the opportunity. While on the trip those eyes of mine got me in trouble by the religious police. Sharia law also states that a man cannot look at a woman if she is not a part of his family. I looked at a Saudi Arabian woman and was immediately grabbed by the witnessing religious police. Though at first scary I calmly told him I didn’t speak Arabic and that I was an American. After hearing this his anger subsided and he gave me a warning to not do it again. The escort team then showed their credentials and I was finally let go. The whole situation taught me how disconnected our world is. I saw how the Saudi Arabian culture grew in its own way apart from the United Arab Emirates that I had visited in my past. It was clear that just because the countries shared a lot of culture, language, and official titles, their priorities were completely different. I returned home safely a few months after the incident and contemplated what I had learned.

For my last deployment, I was tasked to lead a five-man team of new airmen that just came out of training. None of the four, eighteen-year-old airmen had ever left the country and had just left their hometowns to serve with me in Texas. This was one of the biggest tests of my life. I had never been out of the country without a leader that I could always turn to and now I was that leader for them. We went to Ali Al Salem AB in Kuwait, where I oversaw the search, background screening, and management of around two to three hundred other country nationals (OCN’s) every day while simultaneously guiding and checking on the progress and mental health of the four men and women that I was tasked to lead. Not something your ordinary twenty-four-year-old does but it was the path I chose and I will never regret it. For it forged me into a more responsible person that wasn’t only thinking of himself anymore. These kid’s parents put their trust in me without ever even meeting me. I guided them as best as I could with life inside the “sandbox.”

During the downtime periods, I decided to put my rifle down and pick up a book. The book was about neuroscience and I found myself becoming interested in these random pictures of brains. I immediately thought “I’m a brain looking at a brain that’s thinking of a brain, now that’s cool” and then I smiled. It’s funny where one finds what captivates them in life. It can be a random thought at the kitchen table, while watching a video in a coffee shop, or in a book while in the middle of the desert. I couldn’t stop reading that book for my entire deployment. If I didn’t receive orders to be stationed at a new country I would have separated from the military immediately after my return home and pursued neuroscience sooner. However, I’m a traveler and a chance to see another country always excites me. I had to go to the unknown.

After returning home to Texas with my entire team intact, my time of leading them was over. I gave them words of appreciation while also bringing them to the realization that they were now veterans who had served their country and that they should be proud. I told them that I was headed to Turkey and that it was time to part ways but that it was an honor to serve with them. In the following month, I out-processed and said goodbye to all my friends and mentors that I had met while at Laughlin AFB. After five years of being stationed there I felt a sense of accomplishment for what I had done there and boarded my plane to my next adventure.

While in Turkey I immersed myself in the Turkish culture and tried to learn some of their language. The security of the base is classified so I can’t say anything about my work experience. I can say that the beauty of that assignment was that my off days were full of adventures in the western regions of Turkey. I was always off base venturing into places called Kizkalesi, Adana, Antalya, Cappadocia and many more as well as the small country known as Cyprus. I loved the adventure but I couldn’t say the same for my work.

One day I looked around at my leadership and really gave myself a hard-internal talk. Do I really want to be like them and progress in this career? They’re all completely stressed out with a full head of white hair at 35 and are angry at everything. A community full of anger is why I left my hometown and I ended up a new one. With everything I’ve been learning and reading at the time, I knew staying in the military was not only going to be unhealthy but also would be signing up to do something I wasn’t in love with. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t regret giving seven years of my life to the military but there was no way I could stay and evolve in the direction of the military and consciously say I was doing something that makes me happy. Before making my final decision on separating from the military I decided to go on a trip to think it through.

First stop was Santorini, Greece, where I saw the beauty of blue in the sea and the rooftops of its islands. Reminding me of the voyages I have taken. My second location was Rome, Italy, where I saw the beauty of stone and its many shapes within the coliseum and its statues that seem to be everywhere you look. Reminding me of how much I missed home for without it I would not have the strength to adapt and survive. Third was Barcelona, Spain, where I was in awe of the city’s soul which I witnessed within its architecture and food. Reminding me of my family whilst speaking my parents native tongue. Fourth destination was London, England, where I contemplated my penniless past in my tiny hotel room, my hopeless present in its disconnected populace, and the realization of my future in its connected understanding of reality within its war memorials. For my final stop I landed in Zagreb, Croatia, where I found my answer in its romantic streets. If I wasn’t in love with what I was doing I wasn’t going to continue doing it. I rekindled my spark of curiosity at the countries Plitvice Lakes National Park. Reminiscing of not only my elementary school interest in biology while walking its wooden pathways above the rapids but also my thirst for understanding neuroscience while learning the Croatian culture. Why are all cultures different yet so similar? I returned to base and informed my leadership that I wasn’t reenlisting, I was on my way home.

No longer wanting to be humanities clean-up crew, I want to help solve today’s problems with forming and strengthening simple connections which humanity doesn’t see. Like neurons connecting for the first time, I connect what I learned from the military to my school work today. Changing long definitions or names into acronyms the way the military taught me. This way I can memorize necessary equations and remember the order needed to write essays. I lead when I need too and advise when a peer student is trying to gain some experience in the skill. Working with these younger students was hard at first but I’ve realized they’re still growing and are trying new things. I offer advice when they’re trying things I’ve done in the past but I know that sometimes a person must go through it to truly learn from it. I can’t rob them of a life changing experience, if that were to happen to me I wouldn’t be who I am today.

Traditions chain progression, hindering us from moving in new directions. Traditional thinking is lazy thinking that follows what everyone else is doing but never dares to change. It has no growth or life, instead it robs one’s self from doing something unexpected and revolutionary. Life experience teaches someone whether they like something or not but, non-traditional thinking shows that there is hundred ways to do something. I have always been non-traditional in many ways, but, if I wasn’t I would never be the first in my family to travel to foreign countries and learn different languages and cultures, I would not be the first in my family to attend college and learn new concepts, and I most definitely wouldn’t be the first in my family to pursue what makes my heart beat rampant while my mind stays calm and captivated. Being a non-traditional student flips the script of the modern-day student which I show by bringing fresh ideas and experience to the classroom. By breaking the chains of tradition, I lead others to do the same.

*De la piedra crece vida*