My interest in biology initiated in elementary school when I began learning about genetics. I was completely blown away by the fact that something as small as DNA was responsible for creating the bigger picture; for instance, the color of an animal’s fur or the shape of the petals on a flower. Despite this mind-blowing discovery, I was never able to explore it, and inevitably, I lost interest as I matured. An unhealthy mix of my overworked parents and unsafe living conditions further strayed me from that path. Where I was raised, an exposed insecurity often meant compromising one’s survival. This is a place where your focus is on survival, not academics. On my daily walks to school I wasn’t able to keep my eyes focused on school. Instead, they were fixated on watching my back when walking by alcoholics begging for money and avoiding the turf war between the Norteño and Sureño gangs trying to force drugs on us. If you’re sad, you’re were seen as weak. Showing signs of fear got you trampled on, and the happy ones were targeted by the angry. In that dark and hungry place I call home, I knew there was more the world had to offer.

I joined the Air Force to escape the monotonous consequences of my bad life decisions. Suddenly, I was thrust into a new and organized society; a stark contrast from my chaotic household. Releasing all the pent-up frustrations on training, I quickly found myself excelling in my job as a military policeman in addition to its academic responsibilities. For the first time in my life, I found learning enjoyable. To satisfy this newfound thirst for knowledge, I constantly explored new opportunities for my education.

Upon completion of my training, I was stationed at Laughlin AFB, where I quickly matured. Alongside my peers, I oversaw the Air Force’s busiest airfield while also enforcing the laws that governed such bases. In addition, I assisted the U.S. Border Patrol with the capture of numerous drug mules. In total, we had intercepted hundreds of pounds of marijuana and cocaine. After year one of my service, I was given the opportunity to volunteer for my first deployment to the United Arab Emirates. My initial fears subsided when I left for the country.

In the UAE, I quickly found myself exceeding expectations. After a series of promotions, I was chosen to be a member of the first joint UAE-US SWAT team. Communication within the team was difficult, but we quickly adopted a makeshift sign-language system that connected us all. Looking back, I am still somewhat in disbelief that two different cultures could accomplish harrowing tasks like securing buildings and engaging active shooters.

After returning home, I was promoted again and took on more responsibilities as the base first response operator. While being home felt great, I wanted to explore again. Soon enough, I was deployed to Saudi Arabia. A thirteen-man team was to go to a compound named Eskan Village. The mission was to protect Americans training the Saudi Arabian military in addition to Saudi kings, sheiks, princes, and officials. As I had just been promoted, I was chosen to be a fire team leader. My job as the leader included relaying all information to the “Flight Chief” which oversees all base security. Again, I accomplished what was expected of my duties despite one off-base incident related to Sharia law.

In Saudi Arabia, Sharia law states that a man cannot look at a woman if she is not a part of his family. On our day off, my team was offered a chance to shop at a mall with a security escort. Excited to see what Saudi Arabia had to offer I jumped at the opportunity. While on the trip, my curious eyes landed me in trouble with the religious police. Unfortunately, I made eye contact with a Saudi Arabian woman and was immediately detained by the religious police. Though at first apprehensive I calmly told him I didn’t speak Arabic and that I was an American, our escort team showed their credentials and I was finally released. It was clear that just because the Muslim countries I’ve visited shared a lot of cultures, language, and official titles, their priorities were completely different. I returned home a few months after the incident and wondered why religion has such an impact on everyone’s mind.

For my final deployment, I was tasked to lead a five-man team of airmen. This was one of the biggest tests of my life because I’ve never been out of the country without a leader that I couldn’t count on and now I had to be there for them. We went to Ali Al Salem AB, Kuwait where I oversaw the search, background screening, and management of around two to three hundred native labor workers while simultaneously guiding and checking on the mental health of the airmen. This task was not something an average man in his mid-twenties was used to doing, but it was the job I excelled at, as it forged me into a more responsible, selfless human being. Whether they knew or not, the parents of these service members had entrusted me with the lives of their children, and I wouldn’t let them down.

During the downtime periods, I put my rifle down and picked up a book. This book was about neuroscience and I found myself becoming interested in pictures of the brain. Jokingly I thought that “I’m a brain looking at a brain that’s thinking of a brain,” and smiled. That humorous thought made me realize that it can be the little things that inspire something much bigger. I soon realized during my reading that I wanted to separate from the military and return home to pursue neuroscience, but I had received military orders to another country. With my desires to see the rest of the world, I decided to continue my intercontinental adventure. I had to venture into the unknown.

After bringing back my entire team home, my time as their leader was complete. I gave each of them words of appreciation because without them I wouldn't have grown into someone who thinks of others as much as I think for myself. After five years of being stationed at Laughlin AFB, I felt a sense of accomplishment and boarded my plane to the next adventure, Turkey. I immersed myself in the culture of the country and learned some of their language. The security of the base I was stationed in is classified, so I cannot say anything about my work experience. However, I can say that the beauty of that assignment was found in off days near the western regions of Turkey. Venturing into the areas of Kizkalesi, Adana, Antalya, Cappadocia, and the small country of Cyprus. Overall, I loved the adventure but couldn’t say the same for work.

One day I looked around to my leadership and thought, “Do I want to be like them and continue to progress in this career?” At this point, my leaders were bitter and angry at the world and everything in it. I left my hometown because of this same hate and did not want to experience it again. With what I had been learning at the time, I knew staying in the military was not only going to be unhealthy but would also mean dedicating myself to something I didn’t love anymore. That being said, I do not regret giving seven years of my life to the military, but I knew that the future ahead of me would make me feel a familiar anger. Before making my final decision on separating from the military, I decided to go on a self-reflecting journey to collect my thoughts.

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 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 when speaking their native tongue. The fourth destination was London, England, where I was fortunate enough to see their Memorial Day celebration. Everything covered in the symbolic red poppies reminded me of all the people my military friends and I lost. 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 in biology at the countries Plitvice Lakes National Park. Reminiscing of not only my elementary school interests while walking its wooden pathways above the parks mild rapids but also my wish of understanding neuroscience while learning about the war-torn Croatian culture. Why are people always at war with one another? What causes this behavior? I wanted to know and remaining in the military wasn’t going to give me the answer. I returned to base and informed my leadership that I wasn’t reenlisting, I was on my way home.

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 combine what I learned from the military to my school work today. Changing high volume definitions or names into acronyms the way the military taught me helps with the memorization of equations and order of biological functions. I lead when I need to and advise when a peer student is trying to gain some experience in leadership. Working with these younger students is hard at times, but I’ve realized they’re still growing and are seeking to experience life themselves. 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; I wouldn’t be who I am today without everything I've seen, touched, and felt.

Tradition can often chain progression, hindering us from moving in new directions. Conventional thought is one that many follow and it dares not change. It has no growth or life, and instead, steals one’s potential in finding a revolution. Life experiences can teach a right or wrong, but non-traditional thinking shows that there are endless possibilities. Being a non-traditional thinker has guided me to be the first in my family to travel to foreign countries and learn different languages and cultures, the first in my family to attend college and acquire new concepts, and the first in my family to pursue what makes my heart beat rampant while my mind stays captivated. Being a non-traditional student flips the script of the modern-day student which I show by bringing different outlooks and perspectives to the classroom. Along with their students who have experienced many worlds of thought, the School of General Studies breaks the chains of tradition by bringing outside the box thinking into a world class education.

If accepted into the neuroscience and behavior program alongside a concentration in linguistics, I plan to learn about the human brain to help the lower-class people of the world understand empathy as well as how to grow in our society. Without it, places like my childhood neighborhood will continue the traditional route of failing to succeed. Always fighting each other instead of learning and helping each other. If I could better understand how every personality is different even though every human brain is the same I would hopefully change my community’s focus on survival into a focus of educational growth.