



[Jonathan Llamas]: When I went into college, I didn't really give myself the time or the commitment or dedication to really focus in nursing. I didn't realize how competitive nursing was too. I thought when you're in school, as long as you pass your classes, that you'll be able to make it through. I didn't realize that you have to still compete for certain slots in order for you to get into the actual nursing program and get the It required clinical rotations and stuff like that.

So long story short, having a “Cs get degree mentality” didn't bode too well for me. I actually failed and got kicked out of the first nursing program that I was in because of the fact that my grades were so low. I was very young at the time, 17, 18 years old, still trying to figure myself out. I didn't really learn my lesson yet, so I said, like, I'm still going to go to the community college and pursue nursing and see what happens. But you would think that getting kicked out with low grades would kind of motivate you to get better grades, but that wasn't the case, unfortunately. I went ahead and retook some of the classes. I got slightly better grades, but not enough or not competitive enough for me to actually get into the program in community college.

We got to the point where I finished all my prerequisites, and I was speaking to the guidance counselor in college and I remember she looked at me and we had a conversation. She just said, like, “You know, you don't have what it takes to be a nurse. I think you should just quit while you're ahead.”

[Welcome to A Nurse First. This is Jonathan Llamas telling her own A Nurse First story.]

[Jonathan Llamas]: That conversation was a huge pivotal moment for me because it started to create a wake-up call inside of me. But it wasn't until when I kind of told the news to my parents, and I could just see the disappointment specifically on my mother's face, realizing that she wants to do more for me, but she knows that she can only do what she can. Just seeing that really changed my perspective on my life. I told myself, “Well, if I'm going to, you know, not make it in nursing, I'm going to at least give it my honest best shot. And if I go down you know, falling, but knowing that I gave it my best and I can keep my head up high.”

I was able to find a nursing program at West Coast University at the time, and I'm forever grateful for that because West Coast was one of those schools that gave me a second opportunity. Once I applied myself, I was getting As in classes that I never thought I would. I was inducted at Sigma Theta Tau, and it was a huge turning point for me because it gave me the confidence to realize that if I set my mind to something, I can accomplish it. It was a huge honor for me.

I started working first in the emergency room, and that was a learning experience for me, but it wasn't really the best fit. I didn't realize just how nerve-wracking it was for me. I would wake up every morning

with anxiety and panic attacks, not knowing, am I going to be able to help this person who enters this room? Am I capable enough? I know I'm just a new nurse, but I was dealing with a lot of imposter syndrome at the time. So I only worked in the ER for about six months, and then during that time, it was hard because I was working in Orlando, Florida. I was away from everyone in my family from California. But I felt that during that six months, I just felt like I just couldn't handle it anymore. So I moved back.

Once I came back to California, I was in a weird predicament again because of the fact that I wasn't considered a new grad nurse, but I also wasn't considered an experienced nurse because I didn't have the full year of experience. So I didn't know what to do. For some reason, it dawned on me, like during my clinical rotations when I was here in California, I remember a lot of my friends and colleagues told me that I did really well in mental health, that for whatever reason, they were just very impressed by how I was able to communicate and connect with my patients. That kind of made me realize, "Huh, maybe I should go back there and see if they have any openings." I got hired that same day and they said, "When can you start?" That's where I started to fall in love with mental health nursing and psychiatry in general. I felt like I found my niche and my calling.

During that time, I got to work closely with a lot of psychiatrists, a lot of therapists, but I knew I always wanted to do more with my degree. I looked into programs and then I was able to find a nurse practitioner program that specialized in psychiatry which was again something new because during that time in 2014-2015 no one knew what a psychiatric nurse practitioner was. Everyone just knew what a family nurse practitioner was but not a psychiatric nurse practitioner, but I knew this was the field that I wanted to go to and then so I was able to enroll in Loma Linda University in 2015 and then four years after I got my doctor of nursing practice.

[Jonathan's experience working in the emergency room left him questioning everything, until mental health nursing gave him clarity and confidence. When he began sharing his story online, he didn't know that being honest about his setbacks, doubts, and detours would become the very thing that set him apart.]

[Jonathan Llamas]: In 2019, I was at the crossroads. I was like, "Should I share my story? Is it something that is even worth sharing? Or should I just keep it to myself?" I just had a photo of myself at my graduation, and I was holding like my two balloons that kind of showed the degree that I got. And I just kind of explained the journey that it took for me to be here.

I was pleasantly surprised that it reached so many people. A lot of these people on LinkedIn, when they saw my story, a lot of them were reposting it, and a lot of them were high-level people, like people who were executives and part of these big organizations, kind of sharing just how inspiring this post was and congratulating me on getting my doctorate degree, congratulating me for overcoming the obstacles and not giving up. Just seeing how it resonated with them was a huge honor. And the amount of positive comments and people telling me that my story helped inspire them and motivate them and made them realize that, "Hey, if he can do it, I can do it." That was a turning point for me because I didn't realize that, you know, nursing or nurses have such an impactful voice.

It was one of those things where I think it was at that moment where I saw the reactions on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram that I felt like I feel that maybe there is something here that is worth sharing, that I have something worth of value to maybe other people. And then also in Instagram, getting the attention of like so many different nursing influencing brands and companies. that reached out and they told me that they found it inspiring, and they wanted to partner with me and collaborate with me. That was also the start of doing little partnerships here and there and then doing interviews and doing speaking engagements and doing like these social media tours and then like being on the news and actually being as an expert witness and stuff like that. I'm so grateful because I look back at like, "Oh wow, I actually did that." And that happened in the course of five years, like being able to do so much different things that I didn't even think I would ever be blessed to do.

Now shifting into this role now of being considered a social media influencer, but specifically in healthcare, it's a title and a role that I don't take lightly. I try to approach it in a way where I'm just a normal person. I want to speak to you as someone that, hey, I'm in the trenches. I'm working with patients in the grassroots level. So I definitely want to continue using that and continuing to hopefully share my wisdom and insights and advice and help people as much as I can through this. Because again, that's why I went into nursing, right? It's not just helping people through the bedside or through nursing care, but also helping people in different ways, whether it's just giving them the courage or confidence that they need. And I've used that obviously from that point until now, using that to help raise mental health awareness, advocacy, trying to tell people that it doesn't really matter how you start, it's about how you finish that really determines the outcome of your life. And so that shifted perspective has helped a lot of people who have reached out, a lot of maybe nurses who are on the fence, maybe a lot of people who are unsure as to whether or not they're on the right path. And so that's very fulfilling, I think. That's another fulfilling part of my job outside of obviously being a provider is actually being able to inspire other people to live their best life.

[It isn't just the likes, comments, and brand partnerships validating your work either, though. Thousands of nurses voted for you to receive Nurse.org's Nurse Leader of the Year award, Progress to win the overall Nurse Icon of the Year award, and LinkedIn named you one of their top voices in nursing. Beyond visibility, what is the deeper purpose behind the social media influencer platform you've built?]

[Jonathan Llamas]: My goal and hope for this platform is to continue to raise awareness, provide advocacy about mental health, about nurses in general, and also about the different roles that nurses have, especially in education. I definitely want to continue to use my voice for good to help give voice to the voiceless, so to speak, for the people who can't really speak up for themselves, and also for people of color.

When I do social media partnerships and collaborations, I try to approach it in a very in my opinion, in a professional way, in a way that I feel will really honor the nurse's profession as best as we can. I want to come off as someone who is knowledgeable, but also genuine, authentic, and informative. I feel like everyone has a story to share, and I feel like everyone has something that could be of value to someone else. And I think that's the key, though. A lot of people maybe are afraid to feel judged. A lot of people

are afraid to get out of their comfort zone, to share their story. Maybe they feel like they have nothing of value, but that's just not true. I didn't think that my story would touch the life of one person. I just wanted to share it because I wanted to share just the path that I've, the journey that I took to be here. It's not about showing them your superpowers. It's about showing other people their superpowers, right? So just about showing people that they can accomplish more than what they previously thought. That's what makes life so interesting and beautiful is that, you know, you can be your own author of your own greatness, so to speak. You have the pen. You have the ultimate say on how you want to make your story beautiful.

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