

Student who experienced homelessness found his passion for helping others through grocery job

School of Community Resources and Development Outstanding Grad successfully overcame challenges that began with his time in foster care system

By Mark J. Scarp, ASU News
May 6, 2025

Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

Daniel Maldonado was a quiet teenager who made few friends in high school. When you're experiencing life in the foster care system, you seldom stay at one school long enough to create such relationships.

But that all changed when the spring 2025 Outstanding Graduate of the [School of Community Resources and Development](#) entered college.

Maldonado, who earned his bachelor's degree in nonprofit leadership and management, made connecting a priority at Arizona State University. In fact, at first, he said, he overcompensated for lost time by placing socializing ahead of studying on his to-do list.

"I wanted to belong and feel good about myself, but the socializing affected my grades," Maldonado said. "I thought I'd drop out and go on my own."

Fortunately, Maldonado met director Justine Cheung and social worker Kalah Villagrana at [ASU Bridging Success](#), the university's support and resources office for students who have experienced the foster system, based in the [Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions](#).

"Kalah put things on the table straightforward for me. She said, 'I understand where you're coming from, but can I challenge you?' ... She asked me to get a job that summer and come back and tell her how it felt, what I liked and didn't like," Maldonado said.

Maldonado, who is originally from Kansas but who later lived in Peoria, Arizona, became a Fry's grocery store courtesy clerk. He found his passion for helping people as he bagged shoppers' groceries and rounded up shopping carts.

Later that summer, Maldonado met again with Villagrana, who has since received a PhD degree from ASU and is an assistant professor in social work at Michigan State University.

He told her how fun and rewarding his job was, noting how much Fry's motto for its employees — "Everything (is) fresh, everyone (is) friendly and caring; to uplift in every way and to improve every day" — appealed to him.

"She said that I looked like I would like working in nonprofits, as I had a goal to better society," Maldonado said.

The nonprofit leadership and management major seemed like a perfect fit.

Maldonado faced more challenges at the start of his sophomore year, when he decided he could no longer live with his father. Campus housing applications had closed, leaving him without that option. He experienced homelessness along Tempe Town Lake for several weeks.

A typical school day involved using his student U-Pass to take the light rail to a place where he could shower, then reboarding the train to go to class. He could get to school on some days but not others, which affected his grades and attracted his professors' attention.

Maldonado finally revealed that he had been living outdoors. Soon he had a place to stay and a new job on campus helping other students navigate the many challenges of academic life. His schoolwork improved, from C's and B's to B's and A's, and then straight A's, he said.

He offered advice to students who have experienced the foster care system: "Ask for help. You can make anybody your family and your safe place. All you have to do is share," he said. "Don't feel you have to hide. We have the choice to share our story or grieve our story. What's very important is that you ask for help so you can grow your story."

Cheung said Maldonado is an excellent example of what it means to be resilient.

"Although his path to ASU was bumpy and filled with challenges, Daniel came to ASU with a lot of hope for what the future held. He struggled to find his footing those first couple of semesters, but Daniel's greatest strengths are his willingness to ask for support, take the initiative to change and fulfill his commitment to himself and others," Cheung said. "I am in awe of what he has accomplished and have no doubt he will change the world for the better."

After graduation, Maldonado plans to continue his education in graduate school and medical school,

Read on to learn more about his ASU journey:

Note: Answers may have been edited for length and clarity.

Question: What's something you learned while at ASU — in the classroom or otherwise — that surprised you or changed your perspective?

Answer: Businesses, scholarships and teachers don't want you for your smarts, they don't want you because you can do what they ask, they don't want you for your grades and they don't want you for your connections. They want you for your ability to show up regularly, they want you for your eagerness to learn, they want you for your ability to network and they care about your ability to provide a space for others to grow. The same way they nurture you is the same way they want you to nurture others.

Q: Why did you choose ASU?

A: I got a full ride, and it meant I didn't have to pack a bag.

Q: Which professor taught you the most important lesson while at ASU?

A: (Associate Teaching Professor) [Anne Kotleba](#) taught me how to love other people no matter what they think, no matter if they are kind or rude, no matter who they are; they are all humans that we can learn and grow with.

Q: What was your favorite spot to study, meet friends or just think about life?

A: I loved meeting friends at events, and I loved thinking about life at Tempe Town Lake.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: I am going into my master's degree in biomedical diagnostics; I am studying for the Medical College Admission Test to become a surgeon.

Q: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?

A: I'd focus on education. I believe that investing in education can create a ripple effect that addresses many other issues. By providing scholarships, resources and support for underprivileged students, we can empower individuals to change their lives and communities.

Additionally, I'd allocate some funds to create sustainable programs that help these individuals continue their education and skill development. This way, the money wouldn't just be a one-time donation; it would help generate long-term change. To ensure ongoing support, I'd also invest a portion of the funds strategically to create a growing endowment. This would allow us to keep funding educational initiatives well into the future, enabling us to touch more lives every year and address other pressing problems as they arise. This approach not only offers immediate help but also builds a foundation for a brighter, more equitable future.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Daniel Maldonado, spring 2025 Outstanding Graduate of the School of Community Resources and Development, will be pursuing graduate school and medical school. Courtesy photo