

2025 Javedd Khan Essay Prize Winners

Topic: Success

1st Place Winner: Jonathan Lowman

Emptyly Thriving

My journey at Hudson County Community College began on August 30, 2023, my first day of college since 2018. It was the start of what would become one of the most monumental challenges of my life. I was enrolled as a full-time student while also working a full-time job that required me to start each day at five in the morning. Balancing both was no easy task. Today, May 21, 2025, my sister and I will make history as the first people in our bloodline to graduate college. As demanding as these past two years have been, they pale in comparison to what I endured just a few months before my academic journey began.

In January 2023, I lost my job. At first, I wasn't too concerned, I had always been able to find work easily. This time would be different. I remained unemployed for the next four and a half months. During that period, I began spending time with a group of people who, in hindsight, were toxic influences on me. I started dating someone from that circle, which only deepened my ties to them. I spent money I didn't have, maxed out my credit cards just to cover basic bills, and fell deeper into debt. The stress, combined with my environment and growing financial strain, sent me into a dark place. I turned to substances, searching for any fleeting sense of happiness. I was wasting away, and the people around me didn't care. My girlfriend didn't care, and, truthfully, neither did I.

Then, in April, one of my former managers, who would later become a good friend, offered me a lifeline: a place to stay and a job opportunity in Arizona. It meant leaving everything behind in New Jersey, but I had no real choice, so I accepted the offer.

It was my first time traveling out west. Raised in the city, I never imagined I'd find myself living in the middle of the desert. I was nervous, but deep down, I knew I was doing what was right. To my surprise, I really enjoyed it. The job didn't pay much, but with each paycheck, I was slowly climbing out of debt. I had stopped using substances, and I was surrounded by people who genuinely cared about me. Still, one tie to my past lingered: I was still in a relationship with my girlfriend, even from across the country.

That began to change when a new hire joined our team. I don't know if it was love at first sight, but I felt drawn to her immediately. We were often paired together at work, spent time together afterward, and she made me feel genuinely happy. I began to feel like a terrible boyfriend, especially since my girlfriend was talking about moving out to Arizona to be with

me. Eventually, I flew back to Jersey to get my car, my belongings, and bring her out west to live with me.

Returning to Jersey felt wrong from the moment I arrived. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was making a mistake. Hindsight, as they say, is 20/20. Within a week, most of the money I had was gone, spent by my girlfriend and her friends. I then learned she had been cheating on me the entire time. She dumped me, and I just broke down. It felt like I had fallen into an even deeper depression than before. This was truly rock bottom.

Then, a message from the girl in Arizona changed my whole attitude, we had set a date for when I returned. I took my last \$200 and bought road trip supplies to drive back across the country. However, two days before I was supposed to leave, I received a job offer: full-time, solid pay, and a position I had previously held. If you're hoping I followed my heart, I'm sorry to disappoint you, I chose to stay.

Since then, I've paid off my debt and even bought a new car. Now, I'm graduating with summa cum laude honors. I am a proud member of Sigma Kappa Delta, Phi Theta Kappa, and the National Society of Leadership and Success. I have earned a full ride to Rutgers because of my academic performance. A few of my professors have even called me a role model and an inspiration in the classroom. Clearly, I've had some success over the past two years, but what is success without fulfillment?

Looking at where I stand today, it's hard not to feel proud. I've pulled myself out of the darkest chapter of my life, achieved academic excellence, and built a stable future from what once felt like ruins. But in quiet moments, when there's no one applauding or congratulating me, I still feel the weight of what I left behind. Not just the places or the people, but parts of myself I never got to fully explore. I traded peace of mind for stability, and love for logic. That choice brought me recognition, a new car, and acceptance into Rutgers. But it didn't bring me wholeness.

I'm starting to understand that success isn't just about escaping failure, it's about moving toward what truly fills you. Fulfillment isn't something that magically appears after you've achieved your goals; it's the reason you chase those goals in the first place. I haven't found it yet, but if there is a next time, I won't allow myself to turn away from experiencing true happiness again.

1st Place Winner: Ayesha Matari

Breaking Down Barriers: A Tale of Determination and Success

To many people, success is seen as winning awards, making money, or gaining a reputation. But to me, success means being able to create a means of surviving. It means growing and evolving over time. It means finding strength in struggle and refusing to lose your identity in a world that tries to strip it from you at every vile chance it gets.

I am the daughter of two first-generation Palestinian parents, born and raised in the United States. I am someone that will always carry the weight of generations of displacement, trauma, and resilience passed on through heritage and stories of the past. My father was born in a refugee camp in Jordan because my grandparents were forced to flee their homeland. Like millions of other Palestinians, they didn't leave by choice they left by force, with no option but to look back on the life they once had, only to have it become a memory. Their sacrifice was originally rooted in forced displacement but was always also deeply rooted in love they gave up everything they knew so their children could have a future they never had the privilege to pursue.

My grandparents moved from Palestine to Jordan, and eventually to the United States, hoping to build a better life for their family. My father worked nonstop to make that dream real. He provided for my mother, my brothers, my grandparents working long hours, back-to-back, just to make sure we had food, shelter, and opportunity. Then, cancer nearly took his life. But he fought it. He overcame it. And just a few years after surviving, my sister and I were born and later, my father earned his doctorate.

Watching my father go from a refugee camp with barely any sustainable resources to earning the highest level of education while battling illness is the definition of success. It is also the definition of what it means to be Palestinian: to resist, to persist, and to rise above everything no matter how impossible the odds may seem.

Now more than ever, Palestinians must be able to strive for success. We have always had to work harder, fight longer, and prove ourselves beyond reason, because the world rarely gives us room to breathe. What is currently happening today 6,665 miles away by plane the suffering in Gaza, the displacement, the destruction—makes our success not just a personal goal, but a political and moral act. Every degree earned, every voice raised, every life rebuilt is an act of defiance against a world that would rather see us erased.

I don't and will never have the luxury of separating my identity from my ambitions. I carry my people and roots with me in every classroom, every person I interact with, every test I take, every patient I hope to serve. When I succeed, my success is not just for me it is for those who never had the chance to live out their dreams. It is for the children in Gaza who may never

finish school. It is for my father, who was once a little boy in a refugee camp. It is for my grandfather, who never got to see the outcome of his sacrifice, or live to see the flag raised over a free Palestine.

Like many first year college students, I didn't have a perfect structure to follow. There were roadblocks. Aside from that though every class I've taken has pushed me to not only grow academically but also as well personally. They have showed me that greatness isn't rooted in where you start, but how hard you're willing to fight and to give your all to be able to grow and succeed. I struggled through those early semesters, but I never gave up. Each late-night study session and every passed exam was a step closer to breaking a cycle that too many of us are born into.

I want to become a NICU or pediatric nurse. Not for recognition. Not for money. But because I've seen first hand what it's like to feel helpless in a hospital. I watched my grandfather lie in a hospital bed confused, in pain surrounded by people who didn't understand his language or culture. I want to be the nurse who understands. Who comforts. Who speaks up when no one else does. I want to represent not only the healing profession, but also the healing in helping communities who are too often constantly silenced or overlooked in.

Success, to me, is also about community. It's about carrying the stories of those around us especially those who've had to fight just to survive. I think of a Palestinian mother I met who had to leave behind her husband, lost one of her sons and several family members in the war, arrived in the U.S. heartbroken, had to assimilate while grieving, and still found a way to smile for her other children. These stories matter. They show what it truly means to succeed in a world that tries to break you.

Professor Javedd Khan believed in hard work, cultural awareness, and moral courage. I never had the chance to know him, but I know his values. He asked students to dig deep to think, to feel, to speak with purpose. I believe my story does that, because it is not just a reflection of my academic growth, but a testimony to the kind of success that can't be measured in numbers the success of surviving exile, trauma, cancer, and grief, and turning it all into purpose.

Success, for me, is not a finish line. It is the courage to keep moving forward, even when the path is broken. It is honoring my roots while building something new. It is healing, helping, and hoping when all odds say I shouldn't. It is proving that Palestinians despite all that's been stripped and taken from us time and time again we will not only endure, but achieve, and overachieve, time and time again. And for that reason, I believe I am already successful.

