

A Family's Journey – a Story of Opportunity, Perseverance & Support

This lesson can be presented over 1-2 sessions. Instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before the discussion questions.

Lesson Goals

Help students...

- Become inspired to set high goals for the betterment of themselves, their families and communities
- See the wisdom of developing their own process of small steps that will enable them to achieve their goals in all aspects of their lives
- Develop a commitment to persevere through the challenges that will come when we strive for higher goals
- Appreciate the value of education in helping us to achieve our goals and to help others
- Appreciate the importance of family support and how families can motivate and empower us to be our best
- Become more grateful for parents and others in their lives who sacrifice for our well-being
- Acknowledge that none of us achieves higher goals on our own and to look for opportunities to help others achieve their goals
- Become more aware of the opportunities that exist in our country through education and to expand the concept of continued education to include options other than college

Virtues / Character Traits

Compassion: feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

Family Support: complete dedication for the well-being of the members of our family, physically, emotionally and spiritually, motivated by love

Gratitude: being thankful; appreciating the kindness and all good things that other people, organizations and our communities have given to us

Hope: confident expectation of achieving a goal or wish

Perseverance: trying hard and continuously despite obstacles and difficulties

Resilience: the ability to recover from or adjust to change and difficulties. Choosing to use setbacks as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Wisdom: ability to apply knowledge, experience, and understanding in ways that are effective and good. The ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting

Leader Introduction:

Today we're going to learn about an inspiring family from California. The Penas came to America from Mexico in search of opportunity for a better life. However, soon after they arrived, and later in life, they experienced significant setbacks, but instead of giving up they adjusted to each new challenge and moved forward. As we listen to their story, let's see how they supported each other and persevered together to achieve their goals.

Typically we have a video to watch for our stories. Although there isn't a video available for this story, we will read an article written about the Pena family by The Washington Post.

The Washington Post article is the last page of this document. You can have students take turns reading the article out loud or read it to them.

Leader Summary:

The Pena family is an inspiring example of how together within a family we can support each other and positively engage whatever obstacles we may face now and later in life. Let's now discuss how their lives and story speak to us.

Discussion Question Options: *(discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses)*

Before beginning our discussion, let's read over the virtues and their definitions (found in the online lesson as a separate document).

1. What setback did Mr. Pena experience and how did the family deal with it?
(His back was badly injured in a work accident to the point where he could no longer work. The family adapted by the dad becoming the primary caregiver for the children and the mother working multiple jobs to provide income for the family.)

What virtues did the Penas live out in how they responded to Mr. Pena's injury?
(perseverance and resilience)

Let's share some examples from our lives where we encountered a set back within our family and together worked to overcome it, or if we couldn't solve it then worked together to deal with it in a good way. (This is also a journal writing option below).

2. Johana Pena had a goal to be a doctor from a young age. What motivated her to want to become a doctor and especially to be a psychiatrist?
(Johana said that seeing her dad suffer emotionally and physically motivated her to want to help others. In addition, she commented that the community she grew up within in Oakland, CA is a tough place and many people suffer from mental health issues, and she wants to be able to help them.)

What virtue does Johana live out in her desire to help others? **(compassion)**

3. Becoming a doctor is a big goal, and especially when you are from a disadvantaged community that may not offer all of the resources and support that other communities offer. What are the educational opportunities that enabled Johana to pursue her goal?
(She was offered a scholarship to attend University of CA Berkeley and she is now on a partial scholarship for medical school.)

What does this part of the story tell us about opportunity in America?
(Given that scholarships are available we have the opportunity to strive for higher goals by

focusing on our education.)

Note that striving for higher goals doesn't always require attending college. We can have goals of becoming a skilled professional in a number of technical fields and in the trades that offer high-paying jobs and satisfying work and may require only 1-2 years of education after high school, or other technical training. What are some of these professions that can offer us a good living and don't require college?

(medical technicians, many computer coding jobs, electricians, carpentry, plumbing, HVAC, manufacturing)

4. What setback did Johana experience as she was striving to become a doctor?
(She didn't score well enough on her MCAT exam to be accepted into medical school and in fact was turned down by 15 schools.)

What was Johana's initial response to this setback and what did her parents say?

(Johana said she felt defeated and lost and thought her dream of becoming a doctor was over. Her parents "doubled down on their encouragement" reminding her that she was the first member of their family to graduate from college, that she couldn't give up and that her dream wasn't just for herself but also for her community, family and parents.)

5. Do you think having a goal that involves a commitment to others and helping others affects whether we will achieve it, why or why not?
6. What plan did Johana and her family devise for her to continue striving to attend medical school?
(Johana decided she would be able to study for the MCAT exam more effectively out of her home so she went to work every day with her mother and studied throughout each day in the hospital cafeteria.)

Johana and her family's plan wasn't complicated but it was **wise** in having small and simple steps of studying throughout each day that they knew would be effective in helping her to do better on the MCAT exam.

Do you think this example holds true for our goals, that we can succeed through a series of simple and small steps that we commit to living out? Let's talk about realistic examples of this from different areas of our lives such as sports, school, and other activities such as music and hobbies.

7. Johana mentioned that she wanted to be in an environment of doctors where she could envision herself as a doctor. How important do you think this is in achieving our goals, to envision ourselves succeeding in something?
8. What do you think was likely the hardest part of Johana achieving her goal of doing better on the MCAT exam?
(Having the discipline to study for long periods throughout each day.)

What virtue did Johana live out in to continue striving for her goal and doing the difficult thing of studying throughout each day?

(perseverance)

9. Let's talk about the support Johana's family gave to her. How exactly did they support her and how important was their support?
(They encouraged her, especially when she felt defeated; they reminded her that her dream wasn't only for herself but also for her family and community; they worked hard to provide for her and her siblings; they helped provide her with an inspiring place to study)

Do you think Johana would have succeeded in improving her MCAT score and being admitted to medical school without the support of her family?

10. One person wrote in response to the post of Johana and her mother together at the hospital, "Your mother does important work. Another wrote: "Imagine how the hospital environment would be without her. Yes, being a doctor is great, but people wouldn't get very far without the folks who take care of the dirty work."

Do you think we value enough the people in our community who do the simple but important work such as cleaning, serving us food etc.?

What can we do to thank the people in our own school and community for the work that they do for us? Let's start with a discussion of people within our own school and then larger community.

Journal Writing Options

1. Write about an example from your own life where you encountered a set back within your family and together worked to overcome it, or if you couldn't solve it then worked together to deal with it in a good way.
2. Write about a goal that you have in your life:
 - State the goal in detail
 - What is motivating you to strive for the goal?
 - How would achieving your goal impact others?
 - What is your plan for achieving your goal - the specific small and larger steps you think you should live out to achieve your goal?

Extended Activities:

1. Organize students into groups of 3-4 and ask each team to create a thank you note, banner, card, or even a song that they will give / present to someone or a group of people in their school who do simple but important work.
2. Organize students into small groups. Each person in the group will make a short informal presentation to their group on a personal goal. It can be a near term goal on anything important to them now or a future larger goal such as what they want to do for a job in the future. They should state why the goal is important to them, their plan for achieving their goal and the benefits for them and others of achieving their goal. The other students in the group will then ask constructive questions or offer suggestions about the presenter's goal and plan.

The Washington Post, By Cathy Free, October 15, 2021

She's a medical student. Her mom is a custodian at the hospital where she trained.

When mother and daughter posed for the viral photo, Johana Peña was a medical student taking part in a program at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Oakland, Calif. Her mother, Cristina Peña, was a custodian at the hospital. They stood side-by-side in the same blue scrubs at a hospital entrance after taking a lunch break together. Johana Peña was wearing a white doctor's coat.

"It's crazy how life works sometimes," Peña tweeted with the photo. "I get to work with my mom, at the same hospital in the same department. She has been a janitor here for 18 years. She raised a Latina physician in the making! Thank you, mama, I am so proud to be your daughter!"

The photo was taken in 2019, but Peña tweeted it last week to thank her mother for years of support and showing her a strong work ethic. Now that she is applying for residency at hospitals across the country, she wanted the world to know her mother helped make her dream of becoming a psychiatrist possible, she said.

Peña, 29, is a fourth-year medical student at Michigan State University College of Human Medicine in Grand Rapids, where she received a partial scholarship. The photo, which Peña posted Oct. 9, touched a nerve across the Internet as people admired both mother and daughter. "Your mother does important work," wrote one person. "Imagine how the hospital environment would be without her. Yes, being a doctor is great, but people wouldn't get very far without the folks who take care of the dirty work."

A man from Florida tweeted: "Wow! Amazing and inspiring. Here's to our Spanish mamas who put everything out there for their kids."

Cristina Peña, 51, was brought to tears by the comments. Her daughter read several of them to her since Cristina Peña, now a U.S. citizen, has limited English skills, she said. "My parents came here from Mexico when they were 18, in search of the American Dream," said Peña. "They worked hard so they could raise a family and give us a better life."

Her father, Nicolas Peña, was 21 when he badly injured his back in a work accident, she said.

"He was working in a warehouse and a large container fell on him," she said. "He was in chronic pain for many years and couldn't work. So my dad stayed home to look after me and my three siblings and my mom became the sole financial provider for our family."

Her father was the one who combed her hair, made her breakfast and drove her to school, noted Peña, while her mom took several housekeeping jobs at a time to pay the bills.

“I’ve always been so proud of both of [my parents],” said Peña. “Knowing what they had sacrificed made me want to work harder.” From an early age, Peña said she had a desire to help her father heal physically and emotionally after his accident.

“He had endured so much pain, and I’d seen how that affected him,” she said. “And I’d also seen the toll that mental health issues had taken on people in my community.”

“Oakland was a tough place to grow up,” she added. “It’s an underserved community, and I decided that I wanted to help address some of the problems. ”Peña won a scholarship and attended the University of California at Berkeley, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in public health in 2014.

Her score on the medical college admissions test (MCAT) was lower than she hoped, and she was rejected by all 15 medical schools she applied to in 2015 and 2016. She said she felt defeated and lost, and was certain her dream of becoming a psychiatrist was over.

Her parents doubled down on their encouragement. “I was the first person in my family to graduate from college and they wouldn’t let me give up,” recalled Peña. “They kept pushing me and encouraged me to study and take the medical exam again to get a higher score,” she said. “Pretty soon, my dream to become a doctor became bigger than itself. It represented a dream for my parents and my community.”

She decided to take the test again, but she realized that at home, it was too noisy and crowded to effectively study with three younger siblings coming and going. So she decided to motivate herself by studying in a hospital environment — a place where she could envision herself working one day. For most of 2017, she went to work with her mother, and while her mother cleaned patient rooms, Peña sat in the cafeteria studying all day.

“The hospital was not only a perfect place for me to study, it had another huge benefit: I could be near my mother,” said Peña. “While she was upstairs, cleaning, I was downstairs studying. I loved knowing she was nearby. ”The two would share a lunch break together, then drive home at night. “It’s something I’ll always carry with me — my mom would check on me during her breaks and give me the encouragement I needed to get through,” she said. “It made all the difference.” Christina Peña said she was delighted her daughter chose the hospital cafeteria as her spot to study. “I was extremely proud to know that Johana was in such close proximity to me in the

workplace,” she said. “I always tried to encourage her in all that she is doing and have faith that things will work out,” she added.

In 2017, Peña received a higher score on her second exam and was accepted to Michigan State’s medical program in 2018. In 2019, she applied and was accepted to participate in a one-month, [integrated health-care](#) program at the same hospital where she’d studied and had lunch with her mother for a year. “For four weeks, I was able to work with different physicians throughout the hospital and learn about serving communities in the Bay Area,” she said. “And during that time, a friend of my mom’s took a photo of us together. I was happy to be back with her again.” As she accompanied doctors on their rounds, Peña said she recalled all that time she’d spent in the hospital cafeteria, studying for her second medical exam.

Now that Peña is applying for psychiatry residency programs — including one at the hospital where she studied for her medical exams — her parents said they will continue cheering her on.

“Ever since she was a little girl, she always said she wanted to be a doctor, and in a matter of months, that will come to full fruition,” said Nicolas Peña, 51. “She has always been really in tune with her culture, heritage and sense of community, which is honestly one of the main motivating factors that fuels her drive to be a doctor,” he added. “She is a great role model and mentor and continues to impress me with every milestone she passes.”

Cristina Peña said that all the years of polishing floors and emptying garbage cans have been worthwhile to see her oldest daughter achieve her goals. “Her story — our story, is one of hope, especially for immigrants in search of a better life,” she said. “Despite all obstacles, Johana was able to overcome them.”

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2021/10/15/medical-school-student-custodian-mother/?utm_campaign=wp_the_optimist&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpisrc=nl_optimist&carta-url=https%3A%2F%2Fs2.washingtonpost.com%2Fcar-ln-tr%2F34fcfe4%2F616c1e909d2fda9d41148ec2%2F59793df9ade4e26514ca50fd%2F9%2F49%2F616c1e909d2fda9d41148ec2

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