



AASuccess Mental Health Retreat 2021

NEWSLETTER

October 2024

This October, we're exploring the link between fear and success—two forces that often walk hand in hand. Fear isn't just an obstacle; it's a catalyst, pushing us toward growth, clarity, and unexpected triumphs.

In this issue, our writers share how confronting fears—whether through revisiting past challenges, finding growth in mentorship, facing spiritual awakenings, or transforming vulnerabilities into strengths—has shaped their paths. Each story reveals the power of vulnerability in turning fear into courage.

What does success look like when you face your fears head-on? Let's find out together.

Warmly,

Ngoc Huynh, AASuccess Level 2 Student



For the past 10 years, I had a journal that I used to update nearly every six months. I recently read each entry, from middle school up until university. What I read shocked me; I've always had fear, and it jarred me to discover how my fears have not changed, no matter how differently they may have manifested in each situation. The most humbling aspect, however, was that for every instance of fear I had, from my fear of failing, not being good enough, or my uncertainty in my ability to achieve what I hoped for, I am immensely grateful for every challenge that allowed me to grow.

In the past, there were moments I didn't achieve the accomplishments I desired, I did not get into a program I thought would be perfect for me, I did not get the grades I worked hard for, and I didn't handle many situations the way I wish I did. However, in every instance of short-term failure, it ultimately opened another door for me. I truly believe that the key to success, no matter what the future holds, is a growth mindset: I'll continue to put forth my genuine, best efforts to learn and grow while remaining authentic in my values, despite the fears.

- Vivian Cao-Dao, AASuccess Associates

HALLOWEEN AT AASUCCESS: FACING FEARS, LEARNING TOGETHER

"Halloween at AASuccess isn't just about costumes and candy; it's a time for our students to face their fears—on their own terms. This past Halloween, a few of my mentees brought back memories of my own college days. It wasn't just about makeup and costumes; one mentee dove in, balancing both "college" fun and focus, juggling Halloween festivities with the hard work of polishing applications to top-choice universities. Another mentee took the chance to reconnect with personal needs, navigating the inevitable slow-downs (and plenty of pauses) that come with building skills in emotional intelligence—especially when working deeply with mentees who aren't shy about exploring their inner thoughts.





*AASuccess high school students
in one of our Saturday Life Skills sessions*

It all began with what seemed like lighthearted talks, but each conversation was purposeful. Halloween plans were underway, yet reflections on fear, self-doubt, and growth surfaced naturally amid our “Halloween” discussions. I found myself in a unique experience, witnessing how they faced their anxieties and uncertainties, discovering the “silver linings” that appear when we confront our fears and deeper thoughts together.

Moments like these remind me that mentorship isn’t about standing on the sidelines or just giving advice. It’s about being there, sharing a laugh, and sometimes letting my students teach me a thing or two. Back in 2008, for instance, when Tristan (now a professional in his own right) showed up in zombie makeup, he wasn’t just any student. He was a young person learning confrontation in a way I hadn’t imagined—and his courage was as inspiring as any “serious” business meeting I’d been part of.

This Halloween will stay with me—not for the costumes but for the reminder that growth often comes in the unlikeliest of ways. With every “zombie speech” or brave admission of self-doubt—or even my own bouts of “goofiness”—I see that mentorship is as much about learning from them as it is about guiding them. And maybe, just maybe, embracing my own fears (yes, I still have them!) alongside theirs keeps me as resilient—and young—as different individuals I’m lucky to talk with each week. In the process, I might even be reversing a bit of that “bio-aging.”

Dave Nguyen, Founder and Mentor



*AASuccess high school students sharing their thoughts on environmental issues at
the 2024 Gala*

I DON'T WANT TO BREATHE

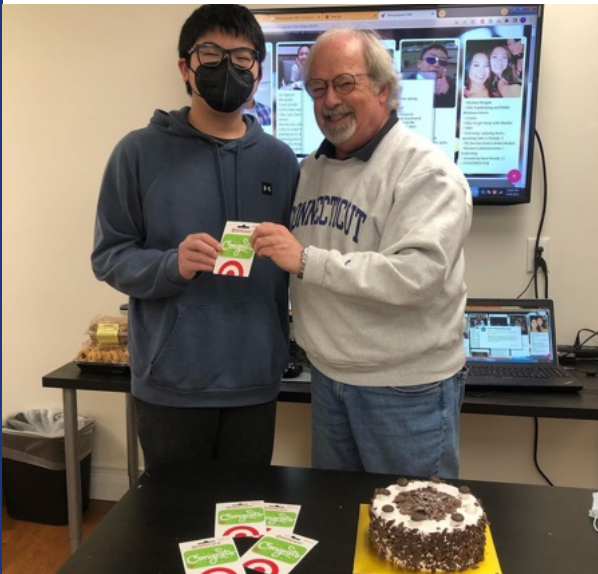
"I can hold my breath. When I do, I feel the quietness, humility, and intimidation of nature's quiet schemes. Holding my breath brings a sense of stillness — something deathly yet strangely tranquil for both my body and spirit. Learning to hold my breath has become my strength. Each time I approach that thin line between chaotic breathing and total stillness, I become a little better at it, a little less afraid of losing my breath. This state brings me a peace I know I'll seek throughout my life.

A recent quote resonated deeply with me: "Hey Capa, we're only stardust," from the movie *Sunshine*. It's a reminder of our cosmic insignificance, of how fleeting we are—just particles passing through this vast universe. But there's something freeing about that thought, an invitation to let go of the fears and burdens that come with existence. Like monks who seek peace in detachment, I too want to be at ease with this sense of nothingness, to accept being ordinary, and to see beauty in the idea of becoming stardust. Although I'm not there yet, still caught in the mundane and terrified of dying, I find beauty in both worlds—detachment and attachment.



A recent "bad trip" gave me a new glimpse into the spiritual world. It's not my first time sensing that world—I know it's real, and I've felt myself growing spiritually. But this experience brought me closer, just a bit further into that realm, enough to shake me. Though I've only seen 30% of what's behind that door, it's still overwhelming. Panic came first, my soul trembling, trying to find calm. But soon I faced it, challenging that fear head-on. At first, I was terrified, but the longer I stayed, the more I felt a thrill, a strange excitement, wanting to understand it more.

Before putting these words through AI, I wrote them in a free flow, born from a spiritual surge—a raw attack on my spirit. I know these words don't need to be structured or exact. But for the sake of your understanding, I've allowed them some shape. They flow freely, like the music I'm listening to now: "Stay" by Hans Zimmer."



Jim giving student Nathan Le Students of the Month Award in early 2022

WORKING WITH DAVE NGUYEN

So I met Dave about 12-13 years ago – and we hit it off immediately. I saw him and the work he started with AASuccess as a unique way to reach out to young people who didn't always see themselves as being a part of a mainstream American experience... even though most of AASuccess kids were born here. As I began to get to know that “generation” of AASuccess students, I was struck by how quiet, capable, and eager to learn they all were. While at the same time, not all of them fully identified as Americans, but rather as Asian kids living in America.

As I got to know them... and Dave better, I saw how he was able to help them to identify their fears and vulnerabilities, while at the same time empowering them to OWN their fears and begin to transform them into strengths and pillars of confidence. I learned these techniques – mostly by listening and offering a sense of historical perspective to those willing to engage with me. I pointed out that my family's own experience, even as a “white person,” was essentially the same as theirs... separated only by time and several generations. My family, too, came to this country to flee persecution (religious) and to escape tyrannical government. The original immigrants/refugees in my family didn't speak English at all at first and only eventually were able to speak it with a thick and easily identifiable accent (of which their children were often ashamed). In short, they were different. But they were eager to allow their children and grandchildren to fully identify as Americans, while keeping important family/cultural traditions alive. This resonated with AASuccess kids. This..... was their life, too.

I always saw Dave as pushing the emotional envelopes with our students... sometimes, frankly, a little too far for (my) comfort. But in doing so, he is able to force our kids to confront and face their demons, accept that we cannot hide from our fears and insecurities, and that by facing and accepting them, we can find ways to begin to walk the slow road to recovering what we have lost, or never had, that often keeps us in dark places.

Students cooking at the AASuccess Winter Retreat, 2021



He also encourages everyone – students, mentors, and parents – to develop and maintain an open and honest dialogue – with ourselves. In that way, we can honestly deal and work with each other. I have often said that there are three things that everyone fears: fear of failure, fear of rejection, and fear of looking or saying something stupid (losing face). But EVERYONE experiences these things at times during our lives. Sometimes, many times. The challenge we all have is not to go through life avoiding situations or relationships that may expose these fears; rather, our challenge is to accept that we have them... and so does everyone else.

All that being said, Dave isn't only as a 50-something guy trying to run a unique organization that teaches life skills and mentors young people, but as a person who is able to look at people in a timeless way, regardless of age or status, to encourage and even push us all to be the best version of ourselves that we can be.



AASuccess YouthCon Scholarship
Award Ceremony, 2021



AASuccess Board of Directors, 2019 Gala