

Submitted by the Nevada Department of Education

There are certain people in life who are fantastic leaders, humanitarians, employers, or bosses who have a certain light shining from within. In a sense, there is an energy that flows from their very souls that is infectious to all who have the privilege to work with them or know them. They are true world changers. We love hearing the stories of how these types of people developed this type of character, leadership, humility, resilience, and fortitude.

It is a privilege to know such students, young people who at such a young age already show this potential. It's truly mind boggling how such young adults can often be so uniquely gifted.

Consider the story of a young lady named Thao. She is a senior at Douglas High School in Minden, Nevada. At the start of this school year, she only had 12.5 credits. To graduate, a student must complete 23 credits in certain subject matters. But a closer look at Thao's transcripts revealed a more complicated story. She had some low grades, but also many A's. She had comments from teachers saying what a pleasure it was to have her in class. But Thao also had a lot of NG's. NG's are marks of No Grade that usually appear when students are absent too many days in a semester.

Thao had grown up in San Francisco with her mother, older sister, and younger brother. Her mom suffered from addiction. Thao and her siblings were pretty much on their own. Thao's older sister got married and moved away when Thao was a freshman in high school. That same year her mom disappeared, leaving Thao and her younger brother living 100% on their own. About a month after her mother's disappearance, Thao and her brother were sent to Minden, Nevada to live with their father, whom they had never even met. Thao's father speaks no English and was not equipped to parent Thao and her younger brother.

About a year later, Thao's mother showed back up. She had been arrested and mandated to inpatient recovery for her addiction. Thao's father took Thao and her brother to San Francisco to visit their mother and left them there. For 6 weeks they were on their own trying to figure out how to get back to Minden while couch surfing wherever they could find a place. When they got back to Minden, they learned that they would earn no credits for the school year because of their long absences. Thao's grades were high but she had just missed too much school.

Following this, during Thao's junior year, her mom fell back into addiction and was hospitalized in the ICU. Thao was able to visit her mom and say goodbye for what she assumed would be the last time. Despite her mother's addiction, Thao still loved her.

Thao's story is sadly not unique. But what is unique about Thao is that she has never stopped caring, trying, learning, or doing what is right. She was helping raise her brother. Working full time. Attending school and doing her best.

For a student to get 10.5 credits in one year...well, it's pretty unheard of. Thao was determined to do it, while working 30-40 hours a week. Thao set out to achieve this goal and never had a frown on her face. There was an inner light that shone on anybody around her. We are now a month away from graduation while looking at our second month of distance learning due to COVID-19. And guess what? Thao is on track for graduation. She just needs her final 3 credits.

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But the most remarkable things about Thao's last two months are her resilience, her determination, her positive attitude. This is the face of a hero. After losing the in-person support she got from her counselors and her teachers each day, losing her job and the income she used to pay bills and buy groceries, losing graduation and walking across the stage, Thao persevered. So many seniors have struggled with the COVID-19 closures, barely communicate with their teachers, and barely turn in work. Yet Thao kicked it into an ever-higher gear. She is truly remarkable. The world has given her every reason to fear that she won't be successful, drug and alcohol free, or a world changer. Yet in spite of everything she has lost, Thao continues to soar to new unimaginable heights.

She is an inspiration. She is the definition of resilience, of determination, of the American Dream. She is going to be a world changer.

