

Leading by Example

BY GRACE BECKER



For Jennifer Pelayo, Receiving the Legends of the Industry Scholarship is an Honor that Goes Far Beyond Herself

Jennifer Pelayo did not set out for a career in grocery. She was on another path altogether, pursuing psychology with a mission to help and connect with people along the way.

To her surprise, however, Jennifer found a niche in the grocery industry that allowed her passion to thrive. Now, with over 15 years in the grocery industry under her belt, Jennifer is the \$10,000 Legends of the Industry Scholarship recipient for the 2022-23 academic year, funded by the California Grocers Association Education Foundation. She is the fifth recipient of this scholarship that was established to honor past industry legends and to recognize up-and-coming grocery leaders who are pursuing a higher education.

No matter what she decided to do with her career, Jennifer always knew that she wanted to work with people. “To be able to meet people and help people, whether they’re children or young adults, that was a passion of mine,” she said.

What fuels Jennifer’s desire to help others? Her faith. “In every situation we enter, we have an opportunity to make an impact,” she said.

Jennifer started working at Smart & Final Stores as a cashier right out of high school after her cheer team coach, who worked at the company encouraged her to apply. After nearly one year working in the store, she transferred to the Smart & Final corporate office for a job in human resources (HR). Jennifer didn’t necessarily associate her passion for human connection with her job in the grocery business until one day an unsuspecting opportunity changed her perspective.

During her first week working in the Smart & Final corporate office, the HR manager asked Jennifer to help organize personnel

files. Typical of any HR office, she sorted through complaints, disciplinary notices, and termination letters, leading Jennifer to ask what the HR manager liked most about his job. He responded, “What I love most is the opportunity to help people become better at what they do here at work, but more importantly, better people for themselves and their families.”

This conversation not only has stuck with her to this day but also planted the seed for Jennifer to pursue a long career in Human Resources.

Growing up, Jennifer dreamt of attending the University of Southern California (USC), but it was not financially possible at the time. None of Jennifer’s family members in the generation before her had the opportunity to go to college. Regardless, Jennifer had always viewed education as a priority, so she enrolled in junior college.

“Even if I didn’t know what I wanted to do, my opportunity was here and I needed to take it,” she said.

With the help of her mentor and current supervisor, Ginny Diaz, once Jennifer decided to switch gears to HR, Ginny taught her what she would have to do to change her education and career path to HR.

Jennifer switched her major from psychology to business, and after receiving her associate’s degree transferred to California State University Los Angeles to study business with an emphasis in HR management. Later, she received her Professional in HR (PHR) certification.

Meanwhile, she held various HR positions at Smart & Final, supporting both stores and supply chain as a Regional HR Representative and Regional HR Manager, advancing to her current position of Director of HR.

Around the time when Jennifer’s son turned three and she started looking into master’s programs, Ginny informed her that she’d been selected to complete the four-day Executive Education Program at USC, which seemed like a sign.

It was an amazing honor and privilege when she officially became a USC Trojan in March 2022 and was accepted into the master’s program.

“It felt surreal,” she said.

Now a full-time HR Director at Smart & Final and full-time master’s student in University of Southern California’s Business Management program, Jennifer has been with Smart & Final for almost 18 years.

Jennifer credits Smart & Final’s culture and growth opportunities as the reason she’s stayed so long, “Smart & Final has been so committed to my growth and has provided an environment I want to live in ... They’ve shown me they care about me.”

She speaks highly of the company’s core values, which include teamwork, respect, accountability, integrity, and growth. “Those core values have been the pillars of who I’ve become,” she said.



For Jennifer, the honor of receiving the \$10,000 Legends of the Industry scholarship goes far beyond herself. Now,

Jennifer is committed to the further growth and development of her team.

When she learned that she is this year’s recipient, Jennifer said, “It’s an honor, but I’m a big believer of creating an example, so this is a way that I can be an example to my team and [show them] to not let any boundaries get in the way of what you want to achieve.”

Jennifer wants her team to consistently continue to grow and know that it’s ok to not always have the solution, but if you try your best and learn from mistakes, ultimately you’ll be better off.

“It’s always a goal of mine to be a leader who my team feels safe with,” she said.

A career woman with a husband and with young children, Jennifer acknowledges that sacrifices have to be made to juggle, work, school, and family.

“It’s important to know when to start, when to stop, and what to adjust,” she said.

Jennifer is mindful that she may be setting an example to other women who she may not even realize are watching, and she does not take it lightly.

“It’s never too late to go back and it’s never too late to start,” she said.

She believes that continuing her educational journey will keep her sharp, “You have to stay knowledgeable, you have to stay educated.” While ultimately working towards the role of Vice President of HR, her aspirations go beyond that, “My personal goal is to be an HR leader.”

The most rewarding part of the job, she says, happens when she’s in the “dark side of HR,” helping someone who’s struggling and wants to give up, who later goes on to receive an award or promotion. “You’re able to see the glimpse of light that you knew was there, but they couldn’t see it,” she said.

Outside of work, Jennifer is deeply involved in her local church and spends her free time meeting with a women’s group weekly, volunteering, leading bible study groups, and coaching for a bible college program. She has also been involved in the Network of Executive Women (now called NextUP).

Ultimately, she hopes that receiving this honor will demonstrate the importance of education to her two young sons, Gregory and Gabriel. “It’s not just about the money, but what the scholarship represents,” she said. ■