

## “SUCCESS DOES NOT NEED TO FOLLOW A TRADITIONAL TIMELINE”

by Corey Nellos

*Introduction: Corey Nellos, 29, graduates with his Master of Business Administration degree in July 2026 from New Mexico Highlands University. The Albuquerque resident is carrying a 4.0 grade point average in graduate school after graduating summa cum laude with his Bachelor of Social Work degree. Nellos was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at age 12. He also has scoliosis.*



My educational and professional journey has not followed a traditional path, but looking back, I think that experience shaped me into the person I am today.

I graduated high school in 2014 while dealing with chronic health conditions that caused me to miss nearly half of my high school years. At the time, I often felt disconnected from other people my age and struggled academically because of my health challenges, not because I lacked intelligence or motivation. After high school, I attempted college at the University of New Mexico but dropped out after one semester. Looking back now, I realize I was still trying to understand my limitations while also struggling to accept the reality of my condition.

For many years, I believed I could simply outwork everything through determination alone. I come from a family of entrepreneurs, and I grew up believing that hard work and ambition could overcome almost anything. However, as I got older, I had to accept that chronic pain changes what is realistically sustainable long-term. Around my early twenties, I slowly shifted from denial into acceptance. I realized I needed to build a future that worked with my limitations instead of constantly fighting against them.

The biggest influence in my life has been my mother, Melinda Heller-Nellos. She raised my siblings and me while earning her master’s degree in clinical counseling and later building an incredible career in behavioral health leadership. Watching her continue to grow professionally and personally through so much adversity showed me what real resilience looks like.

My mom’s partner told me about the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Your agency gave me the ability to go back to school and not go into debt over it. You gave me a chance at life. I realized that without an education, I would not be able to get gainful employment. NMDVR also gave me the confidence to go back and a path to professional and personal stability.



I returned to school as an older and more focused adult. During this time, I experienced major life challenges, including a divorce, chronic pain management, and eventually a total knee replacement. While recovering from surgery and attending physical therapy twice a week for nearly ten months, I continued taking classes and building my behavioral health billing business.

One of the hardest parts about living with chronic illness is that many struggles are invisible. People often do not see the medications, doctor appointments, exhaustion, or constant balancing act between work, education, health, and everyday responsibilities. There are good days and bad days, and many times I have pushed myself beyond my physical limits simply because life still has to move forward.

Today, I own a behavioral health billing company that originally started as a side business but has since grown into something much more meaningful to me. Entrepreneurship has allowed me to create a professional path that aligns with both my ambition and the realities of living with chronic illness. It has also shown me that I am capable of more than I once believed.

Graduating represents validation, independence, relief, and hope for me. More than anything, it represents proof that despite the obstacles I faced, I was always capable of achieving these goals. My journey taught me that resilience is not about pretending things are easy. It is about continuing to move forward even when life is difficult, uncertain, exhausting, and painful.

The support I received through NMDVR helped make long-term educational and professional goals feel realistic and attainable. Before learning about NMDVR, I honestly did not know resources like this existed. I hope my story encourages others facing chronic illness or disability to understand that success does not need to follow a traditional timeline. Sometimes progress looks different, but that does not make it any less meaningful.

*For information about how NMDVR can help you achieve your employment or self-employment goals, contact your nearest office. There are two dozen locations across the state: [dvr.state.nm.us/locations/](http://dvr.state.nm.us/locations/).*

*The New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation helps individuals with disabilities find suitable employment. Vocational rehabilitation is a voluntary program supporting people who want to work. With a long history of success and proven methodology for making the best fits, NMDVR is committed to helping participants thrive in their communities. For more information, visit [dvr.state.nm.us](http://dvr.state.nm.us) or call 505-954-8500.*

*The Vocational Rehabilitation program receives 78.7% of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2025, the total awarded is \$26,800,619. The remaining 21.3% is funded by state appropriations and transfers from the Commission for the Blind and Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.*