

SOUTH UNIVERSITY

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT (PA) PROGRAM

**PA**

PRECEPTOR & ALUMNI  
**PROFILE**



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# FROM THIRD CULTURE KID TO PA: MY JOURNEY AND TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Written by Alumni Kelly Piedrahita, PA-C

Growing up as a "Third Culture Kid" due to my dad's job, I had a unique upbringing that took me across continents, from New Orleans to Norway, Australia, Malaysia, and finally back to Texas. My path to becoming a Physician Assistant (PA) was anything but conventional, marked by twists, turns, and valuable lessons. In this article, I'll share my journey, insights into the field, and tips for fellow PAs or aspiring students.



## **A Non-Traditional Path**

My journey towards becoming a PA was far from linear. After completing my bachelor's degree in Neuroscience and Behavior at Florida Atlantic University, I ventured into unconventional career choices, including teaching Pilates and leading early-morning spin classes. However, my true calling became evident during my pursuit of a master's degree in Global Health from Northwestern University.

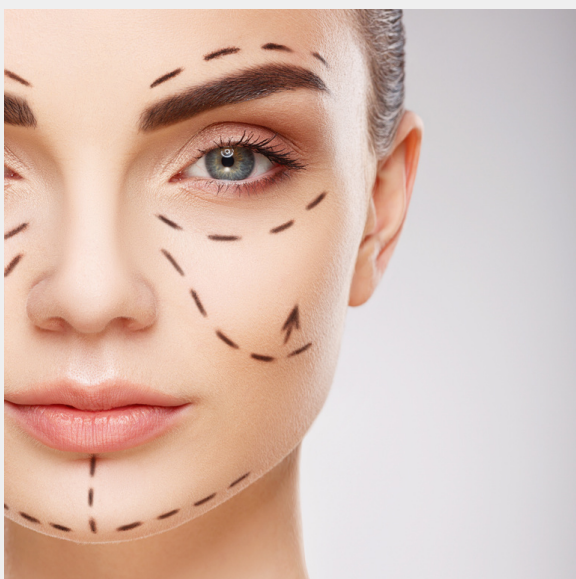
It took six years of juggling multiple responsibilities and my pursuit of further education to realize that becoming a PA was not just a good fit but the only path I could envision for my future. Despite not fitting the mold of a traditional applicant, I was fortunate enough to be accepted into the PA program at South.

## **A Fulfilling Career in Plastic Surgery**

Today, I work as a PA for Dr. Daniel Kapp, a Plastic Surgeon in West Palm Beach. While he does perform cosmetic procedures such as botox and fillers, the bulk of his practice centers on reconstructive surgery, particularly breast reconstruction after mastectomy and other forms of reconstruction, including post-Mohs and traumatic injuries.

Dr. Kapp's practice boasts an in-office operating suite for procedures requiring local anesthesia, while more complex surgeries take place in a hospital setting. Additionally, we handle a significant volume of Wound Care cases, addressing both chronic and acute wounds on select days each week. Although I'm still in the process of credentialing with multiple hospitals, I look forward to assisting in hospital surgeries soon.

## **Learning in a Challenging Environment**



Transitioning into the field of plastic surgery presented a steep learning curve due to its diversity and complexity. Dr. Kapp, a sharp and candid mentor, challenged me daily. I quickly learned to trust his criticism as a means of personal growth rather than feeling belittled. We both understand that my level of independence in his clinic requires a substantial time investment aimed at increasing surgical volume and practice revenue.

## **Networking and Word of Mouth**



During my PA school years, I received invaluable advice: say yes to everything and embrace networking. Most new graduates secure their jobs through word-of-mouth referrals, making it crucial to put oneself out there. I pushed my introverted tendencies aside, introduced myself to professionals, followed up with polite emails, and received two job interviews even before graduation. The pivotal connection with Dr. Kapp came from a word-of-mouth referral, emphasizing the significance of professional networking in this field.

## Preparing for Exams

Regarding academic preparation, I focused on understanding the "why" behind topics to retain information effectively. Flashcards weren't my preferred method. Instead, I took comprehensive notes during didactic studies and reviewed them with contrasting colors and annotations. When EOR (End of Rotation) exams approached, I concentrated on areas needing improvement, utilizing online resources like Online Med Ed and Osmosis for deeper understanding.

For the PANCE (Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam), I scheduled it shortly after graduation to capitalize on the momentum from our review course. I supplemented my study routine with video reviews and UWorld questions. Here are some additional tips:

**Trust your instincts on simple questions and move forward.**

**Complex questions may require multiple layers of thinking.**

**Familiarize yourself with PA profession-related questions.**

**Deep dive into bacteria descriptors and antibiotics.**

**Build study routines that suit your learning style.**



## My Final Thoughts

As you embark on your PA career, remember that humility and openness to learning are vital. You may feel inexperienced during your initial months or even a year of practice, and that's normal. Establish genuine connections with office staff, nurses, and medical assistants, as they will be invaluable sources of support and knowledge.

Becoming a Physician Assistant is a fulfilling journey that may take unexpected turns, as it did for me. Embrace challenges, network actively, and adopt effective study habits. Ultimately, the satisfaction of helping patients makes the entire process worthwhile. Best of luck in your journey as a PA!

