Profile on Angel Zelaya, ASU LDNS Lab Junior Fellow

By: Maria Manalog, Research Aide

Angel Zelaya is one of two junior fellows at the Leadership, Diplomacy and National Security Lab here at Arizona State University. Before ending up as a Sundevil, he was a United States Air Force Academy Falcon.

“Overall, USAFA was very unique, and I loved it. It was by far one of the best things that have ever happened to me,” Zelaya said. “Our job [as USAFA students] was to go to school every single day in a block schedule on top of required courses like boxing, swimming, and combatives. In the summers, [we] had to do military training and from a young age were exposed to things like jumping out of or flying planes. That’s what made my college experience a little bit different.”

He graduated from USAFA with his Bachelor’s degree in Business Management in 2020. I asked him why he chose that line of study and how that played into his decision to pursue his MA in International Affairs & Leadership at ASU.

“I come from very humble beginnings, so I wanted to learn more about money, [like] how to manage finances and build my own family generational wealth,” he recalled. “On top of that, I come from a Hispanic background, so I chose to minor in Spanish, too. By taking language classes at USAFA, it got me involved in a lot of international-related things, which is why I decided to pursue my MA.”

Zelaya said despite there being a ton of options for MA programs in International Affairs, ASU’s caught his attention because it was brand new.

“Once I was admitted into the school in Fall 2021, I interviewed some of the faculty members to get a better grasp of [how the program worked]. Basically, they told me the experience itself was very experience-based, and what I wanted to take away from my master’s degree was knowledge from lifetime practitioners in the field,” he stated. “I know that this program had that, and I know that in my field I’d be working with a lot of ambassadors with my career in the Air Force, so I figured why not learn from them.”

With that in mind, Zelaya first applied to the junior fellowship at the LDNS Lab in the Spring 2022 semester. Although he was initially rejected, he reapplied during the semester he took off to complete flight school and was accepted into the Spring 2023 cohort.

“The reason why I applied was because I liked how vague the job description was. It seemed like I would be given work that I could create my own solutions for and present them - what I would get out of it was as much as I could put in.”

I was personally interested in what kind of work he is doing now for the lab, being that I was also newly hired this semester. I was surprised to learn that we hold the same job titles as research aides, but we worked on very different topics.

“As a junior fellow, I serve as a research aide for the LDNS Lab,” he explained. “I work one-on-one with an ambassador on [Global Literacy] Masterclass series. They host discussions and presentations for all who are interested in international affairs.”

Currently, Zelaya is compiling a slide deck for a Masterclass that touches on a trifecta of topics: the importance of the United States’ involvement and policies in climate change, technological advances, and global health. The project is determined to be completed by the end of the semester in hopes of being launched in either the summer or fall.

As he continues his research, he claims his favorite part of being involved at the LDNS Lab is how his classes go hand in hand with his fellowship work.
“Right now I’m in a class called Human Rights and Realpolitik, and a lot of what I’m researching now for the fellowship is good information to have for papers and presentations. It really comes together,” he says.

Looking into the future, Zelaya’s post grad plans are to become a defense attaché and work at an embassy as a military liaison. “To work with the Chilean or Spaniard Air Force would be my dream job,” he beams.

Last spring, he attended Washington Week, where he networked with people that worked at institutions such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank. “I fell in love with D.C. as a whole and how the entire community strived altogether to uphold American values. Ultimately, I’d love to move there and continue my career at any of those organizations as a US liaison working abroad,” Zelaya said.

As we closed off our chat, I asked Angel if he had any tips to share with other students who are interested in applying to the lab’s fellowship programs.

“[In your application], talk about what you can bring to the table instead of what you can take away,” he advised. “Many people think in the lens of what looks good on their resume, but it’s more about what you can offer the LDNS Lab that sets you apart.”