



Leadership Without a Title

By Caitlin Buchecker

During the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty disrupted nearly every aspect of daily life—including education. While enrolled in cosmetology school, my classmates and I faced constant changes: limited hands-on practice, safety restrictions, and the fear that our education might be derailed altogether. Anxiety ran high; many students questioned whether continuing was even worth it.

In the midst of that uncertainty, I realized that leadership did not require a title—it required presence. I made a conscious effort to stay positive and grounded, even when circumstances were unpredictable. I encouraged my classmates to continue showing up, reminding them that our shared goal of graduating had not changed, even if the path had been derailed. Unity was essential; none of us could navigate that period alone.

I invested time outside of school to support others, staying after class to help my peers study, learn new techniques, and adapt to new limitations. When hands-on opportunities were reduced, collaboration became our strongest tool. By sharing knowledge, practicing together, and lifting each other’s spirits, we built a supportive environment that helped everyone graduate successfully.

What made this experience especially meaningful was that I was navigating significant personal challenges at the same time, including losses, isolation, addiction struggles, and depression. Despite this, I chose to continue showing up—not only for my own education, but for my peers. Supporting others gave me purpose during a time when motivation was difficult to find, and it reinforced the idea that leadership often means putting collective progress ahead of personal struggle.

As a result, many of my classmates persisted through the program despite the limitations of the pandemic. More importantly, we preserved a sense of connection and resilience in an environment that could have easily fallen apart. This experience taught me that effective leadership is rooted in empathy, consistency, and encouragement. By leading with unity and purpose, even in the darkest moments, you can help others—and yourself—move forward.