

Why I Changed My Mind About Leaving School After My Mentor Died

By Ashwin Joshi

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I was at home in Kennewick, visiting family, when I viewed the LinkedIn post. Andre Marquis was gone.

I set my phone down on my desk, my hands suddenly unsteady. Andre had guided me through Monday office hours during UC Launch. He'd become central during my second semester at Berkeley through our Jupiter group sessions. Most importantly, he'd helped me untangle my biggest challenges with that thoughtful expression I'd grown to depend on.

Then came the follow-up email that would shatter me completely: suicide.

I stared at the word until it blurred. Remembering how Andre's voice carried that quiet authority, the same voice that had guided me through countless Monday afternoons that belonged to someone who'd built billion-dollar companies yet still made time for students.

The Weight of Wisdom Lost

Andre had a way of planting ideas without you noticing. During our Monday Zooms, he'd watch me scribble frantically, then lean back and smile. "Slow down, Ashwin. I'm not going anywhere."

But hindsight is a cruel teacher.

Our last conversation in April started like the others: me rattling off everything I was trying to build at once, urgency bleeding through my voice. Andre listened, then interrupted with a gentle laugh.

"You're doing it again," he said. "You think because you're young, you have to solve everything at once. Perfect product, perfect pitch, billion-dollar company, change the world: all before you turn twenty-five."

I started to object, but he held up a hand.

"Look, I get it. Everyone's telling you to ship fast, move fast, whatever. But you're trying to solve like five different problems at once, which means you're not really talking to customers, and customers are literally the only thing that matters. Pick one thing you actually give a shit about and go deep on that, because that's how you go from good to great."

He leaned forward, his expression growing more serious. "Here's what nobody tells you at your age: you'll never get this time back. I'm confident you'll build successful companies but only if you don't burn out chasing the first shiny opportunity."

There was a long pause as he studied my face through the screen.

"I know you're eager to leave Berkeley, Ashwin, and that's fine but again think carefully about your trade-offs not just classes, but friendships, experiences, and the precious time to discover who you really are before the world demands everything from you."

I nodded enthusiastically, thinking I understood, yet understanding and living wisdom are as far apart as hearing rain and feeling it soak through your clothes.

My parents taught me that the most special people in our lives carry forward the dreams of those who came before them. Every sacrifice, every late night, every opportunity created was an investment in possibilities they might never see fulfilled. Andre planted seeds in my mind every Monday afternoon, trusting they would one day grow into something meaningful.

I just never imagined I'd have to tend that garden this soon without him.

The Offer That Tested Everything I Said I Wanted

A little over a month before Andre's death, my phone rang with a proposition that would change my 20s. A friend who had believed in my potential, since I was in high school when I first testified in the Washington legislature, started the call by telling me how impressed he was by everything I'd accomplished in my short time in Silicon Valley. He shared more about his business and where he saw it heading. As our conversations deepened, what started as exploratory discussions quickly escalated into formal talks under confidentiality agreements.

He wasn't just after the technology we'd built at InstaTrain, he wanted me specifically, with a long-term contract that would secure my financial future well before I could legally buy a drink.

The recognition hit me like caffeine on an empty stomach: electric and overwhelming. Proof that all those late nights and relentless hustle hadn't been in vain.

Over the following weeks, the deal grew more serious: legal documents, financial projections, integration plans consumed my days and nights. But as I calculated obsessively about the potential wealth, Andre's words from April kept surfacing. What was the value of burning out chasing the first shiny opportunity?

The pressure mounted from every direction. Every podcast, every founder story, every piece of Silicon Valley advice sang the same chorus: take the money, prove yourself, sprint toward financial freedom before you're too old to realize what you've lost.

How Grief Changed My Definition of Success

Then, just as everything was moving forward smoothly, Andre died & the arithmetic of my life suddenly seemed written in a language I no longer recognized.

A few days later, I found myself staring at my phone, knowing I had to make the call I'd been dreading. When my friend picked up, I could barely recognize my own voice as I explained that I wasn't in the right headspace to commit to something this consequential. I told him I was processing a major loss and couldn't promise the energy & focus that kind of opportunity deserved.

He expressed genuine sympathy about Andre's death & acknowledged that the acquisition had always been more about bringing me aboard than the technology itself. Without my commitment, he said, it didn't make sense for either of us to move forward. He suggested I take the time I needed, though I could hear the disappointment beneath his understanding tone.

After hanging up, I sat in my childhood bedroom staring at the plan I had written up a year ago on my whiteboard. Part of me wondered if I was making a massive mistake, turning down such a big opportunity because I was grieving. But something deeper had shifted when Andre died, something that made all my previous calculations feel hollow.

That night, I found myself thinking about Andre's final lesson, one he'd never intended to teach. Achievement without purpose is just sprinting toward a finish line that keeps moving farther away.

The Long View

My family's story is built on patient thinking. My grandparents didn't leave India seeking quick riches; they left so they could plant roots for generations to come. My parents didn't sacrifice for my education expecting immediate returns: they invested in possibilities that would bloom over time.

Andre had tried to teach me the same principle, but I'd been too busy sprinting to listen.

I'm choosing to stay at Berkeley because I'm rejecting the startup world's definition of urgency. Andre was right. I'll never get this time back, and the opportunities he was confident I'd build will still be there when I'm ready to pursue them with the right pace & purpose.

Embracing this long-view approach, I've also made the difficult decision to shut down InstaTrain & return the full investment to our investors. It wasn't fair to keep their money when my heart was no longer in building that particular future. The transparency felt necessary. They deserved to know that their founder was fundamentally questioning everything he thought he wanted.

Service to others has always grounded me when everything else felt uncertain, connecting me to the values my family put in my bones. Maybe that's where I need to start rebuilding. Not with another company, but with something that could prevent other entrepreneurs from facing what Andre faced alone.

Turning Loss Into Support

I'm still broken by this loss. Some days, the weight of losing someone who believed in me more than I believed in myself feels unbearable. I learned from someone close to him that Andre left clear instructions to share the truth about his passing without sugar coating it. He showed honesty even in his final moments. Maybe this brokenness is exactly what needs to be shared, honest thoughts on how devastating it is to lose those who guide us & how the never-ending pressure of our culture can make that grief feel isolating.

Our startup culture celebrates speed, often ignoring sustainability & human wellbeing. It prioritizes numbers over people & individual wins over community. Andre's death showed me how we're focusing on the wrong things.

In Andre's honor, I'm creating programs through my 501(c)(3), [All Teens Financial Academy](#) (ATFA), to build spaces where entrepreneurs of all ages can talk honestly about their struggles, find support when they need it most & choose lasting wellness over quick wins. As we expand resources

to support entrepreneurs across all stages, we're evaluating a potential name change for ATFA to better reflect our wider mission.

Join me in reshaping what success means in entrepreneurship. Let's prioritize lasting strength and genuine wellbeing over quick wins and empty validation.

If this story speaks to you, please reach out. Together, we can change what success truly means, supporting those who dare to dream while caring for their wellbeing.

Email me at ashwin.joshi@atfaacademy.org to connect, share your story, or join this growing community.