Youth primarily are susceptible to experiencing the greatest declines in life as a result of living in unstable environments. In addition, StatsCan data divulges visible minority groups are more likely than Whites to report poor mental health. Systemic inequities uniquely exacerbate the issues that residents of underserved communities face daily. Precarious work, poverty, racism. Mental Health is prevalent among these concerns as data increasingly shows youth are having trouble navigating mental wellness and combating harmful proclivities. Marginalized youth face unique socio-economic barriers. The community needs life support, literally and figuratively as Canadians young and old are required to subjugate, prevail and demonstrate perseverance in the face of adversity.

According to Dr. Dwayne Brown, the ability to discern emotions and character is a vital component for progression in the lives of inner-city Toronto youth. In a National Post article, Brown recognizes Emotional Intelligence to be among the most profound determiners which life hinges on in underserved communities. “Emotional Intelligence is life and death where I am from.” This statement directly correlates to my life respective to the way I was able to persevere despite coming from a seemingly unnavigable environment. Living in an environment where one is forced to normalize plus balance the witnessing the ramifications of systemic equities can be a subordinating combination. Watching parents take food out of their mouth to divide it among your siblings, suddenly losing friends to gun violence and trauma, plus constant reminders by outer society of your flaws; similarly to a majority of sideline youth, is my experience.

While growing up in Jane Finch, various blessings disguised as barriers have presented themselves in my life. Prior to developing a mindset contingent on resilience, I wrestled with a plethora of the obstacles. Among the various unfortunate which forced me to demonstrate perseverance, a significant event which still informs the person I am today is the loss of two childhood friends to gun violence. In addition to enduring the void of no longer seeing two people who were once a part of my everyday life, various ramifications emerged in respondence to the traumatic event. My generation was suddenly introduced to the rinse and repeat cycle the community swallows our people into. Increasingly, loved ones began to disappear. Depression, turmoil, violence and survival quickly became the surreal lens life was perceived from. With that said, unfortunately, it is understandable when underprivileged youth succumb to the unfair socio-economic barriers they exist within. There have been various seasons in my life where due to daily experiences, it would have been easy to accept the lie that my counterparts and I were mere products of our environment and created to wrestle with chaos. The lack of resources, stable support systems and (emotional) outlets sometimes caused me to believe I did not deserve to be granted any opportunities. That perhaps there was a reason opportunity does not necessarily meet preparation. Being plagued with a myriad of negative thoughts lead to low self-esteem and ultimately self-sabotage as I felt I did not deserve to share space among the top academics in my generation.

According to Dr. Joseph Smith “Meaningful societal and political change begins with the radical deepening of our own self-consciousness. Our thought-patterns, habits, and emotions, given that they often go unacknowledged and unattended to, present us with our most formidable existential challenges — both personal and social.” He goes on to say “Education (in all its various forms: formal, political, societal, experiential) if it is healthy, is that process by which we disclose and elucidate what so often besets us: our biases, assumptions, prejudices, and traumas.” In my opinion, time and time again in my life have I underwent the same emotional intelligence and educational process which births change and progression that both Dr. Dwayne Brown and Dr. Joseph Smith allude to. Living in an underserved community, one is in a very vulnerable place; therefore, are being susceptible to participating in harmful proclivities or resorting to crime in order to make ends meet/express the profound frustration and discomfort they are under. Contrary to choosing to express myself in a way that would further disrupt society, I demonstrated the emotional intelligence that Dr. Dwayne Brown reminds us is imperative for survival in these communities. At a young age I was able to identify that the self-sabotaging mindset of imposter syndrome and low self-esteem, opposed to myself was the product of my environment. With that said, I committed myself to a high standard, excelling academically and socially as a leader in my community and youth across the city of Toronto. Ironically, my unique socio-economic barriers acted as key guiding principles of conduct regarding my ambition and continued success. My efforts grant me the opportunity to hold positions like being City of Toronto’s Youth Council’s Vice President where I can represent the voice of my generation across the city. My testimony to getting where I am today is a clear representation that I am a worthy recipient of the Carmen Anderson award as I prevailed and persevered in the face of hardship, also because this award will allow me to further advance my academic career and my standing as a leader within my community. Representing possibility for all youth.