



VOICES

How our unique experiences shape who we are

2022-2023



Cover art by Julia Fawcett

VOICES

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DO IT OR DIE TRYING

Sara-Emilie Clark

Content contains conversations surrounding mental health and burnout.

When I was fifteen, my swim coach abruptly pulled my team out of the water halfway through practice. I exchanged gleeful looks with my friends, as this meant we were undoubtedly in for some sort of motivational speech, giving us a break from the set we were tackling that day. The coach gave each of us a long stare. “How many of you,” he said, “have ever trained so hard that you physically could not continue? How many of you have actually thrown up at the end of a practice?”

Bemused, I raised my hand. Just a few days earlier, I had stumbled from the pool during a break between sets and vomited within seconds

of making it to the changeroom. The coach continued: “If you didn’t answer yes to either of those questions, maybe it’s time you reevaluate how much effort you’re putting into this sport. How much do you really care about winning?”

The point he was trying to make was that pushing oneself as far as possible past one’s physical limits was the ultimate goal. That was how you improved, won your races, beat your personal bests. Having never been the most naturally talented athlete, I took that message to heart. I internalized the idea that true success only came when you had absolutely nothing left – when you had given all that you could possibly give.

When it comes to swimming, and any other competitive sport, going the extra mile literally and figuratively is what defines the difference between a good athlete and a great athlete. It's a lesson taught in an attempt to foster the mindset of a champion. It's the attitude, or so we are told, of winners.

I'm twenty-one now, and haven't swum competitively in over three years. When I moved to university, the sport's absence left a gaping hole in my schedule. This newfound time was plugged first with academics, until the arrival of a certain virus. The pandemic struck during March of my first year, and with half of my classes cancelled, my free time suddenly quadrupled. I applied for an excess of extracurriculars that flooded to fill the gap. These opportunities opened new doors – rabbit holes I was eager to fall through.

I lived in residence again in my second year as a soph. Months spent looking after the needs of those around me, as well as my own personal demands, led to burnout. Total, immense burnout. But instead of lightening my workload, I piled more on my plate. I told myself that because I was clinging on by a thread, I had the capacity to take on more. My well-being was suffering, yet it felt like a necessary sacrifice to make. The lessons from my days as an athlete echoed in my head, especially when I began dropping the ball – hating myself for missing a deadline, for postponing a meeting, for failing to respond to a notification. I could still continue, even if things were just barely getting done. There was still something left to give.

Those kinds of messaging and deep-seated feelings of inadequacy are not unique to athletes. We've all been bred into a culture that celebrates burning out. Ever heard the saying, "do it or die trying"? The mentality that you've only done enough when you absolutely cannot do anymore, when you have sacrificed everything you can for whatever goal you are chasing – that is the mindset that is revered and rewarded. When we're faced with rejection, our instinctual reaction is to question *what more we could have done*.

Existing in a constant state of burnout is in no way sustainable, nor healthy. Countless studies have demonstrated the harmful effects it has on the body and mind. When we experience burnout, life itself becomes just another task. Breaks feel like failure, and failure feels like the end of the world. Living becomes surviving. Unlearning those ingrained beliefs and rewiring our brains to be more accepting of perceived failure and more tolerable of rest is a daunting prospect, but a necessary one.

These years at university have been a rollercoaster, but they've also profoundly shaped the person I am growing to be. I've made incredible lifelong friends, become a part of communities on campus that I adore, and have found ways to expand my interests personally and professionally. Learning how to rest, to set boundaries and stick to them, has allowed me to find joy in the every day, and to take care of myself and who I want to be

Healing isn't a linear process. It requires the understanding that burnout is not a prerequisite for success, nor is it equivalent to contentment and happiness. Altering these deep-seated beliefs relies on the practice of radical self-acceptance; growing to be at peace with who we are and what we've done.





VOICES

LEAVE YOUR LIGHT ON

Light Naing

If you were a fan of *Grey's Anatomy* in your high school years, I'm pretty sure you've probably thought of becoming a doctor at one point in time, just like me. Watching Dr. McDreamy take out brain tumours was the highlight of my days and I did everything I could in high school to get into med school. My schedule was packed with science courses like AP Biology, AP Chemistry, and Anatomy and Physiology, and I involved myself in extracurriculars only related to healthcare. I pulled all-nighters at least twice a week and prepared tirelessly for my SATs and APs. I was, to put it simply, a "keener."

You've probably gone through that or know someone who went through that. Well, it got worse for me. Knowing how hard medicine

programs were, I began to use my identity as a "diversity pitch" for my college applications. I would talk about how I felt oppressed as a queer individual even if it wasn't relevant. I would use my Southeast Asian background to appeal as a racially diverse applicant. With every aspect of who I was and throughout everything that I did in my four years of high school, the wheels were turning in my head on how I could apply this to my college application. I felt no satisfaction from helping others, no happiness from learning new things, no pride in my identity, no acknowledgment of my privilege, nothing.

And then, in late January, I got a notification from this direct-entry medicine program at Cardiff University that I applied to. It was my

dream program because it would basically hand me a medical school degree after just five years.

And guess what? I got rejected, and my heart sank.

Granted, I had other options, but at that moment, everything that I had ever worked for in the past four years felt like a waste of time. And for some reason, it was a wake-up call for me. I had been so incredibly dishonest and ingenuine to everyone around me and myself for the sole purpose of pursuing a career that was inspired by a television show. I felt like my real “failure” wasn’t getting rejected from medical school, but lying about who I was and what I did to literally everyone just so I could live the life I see on TV.

In the months that followed, I did a lot of reflection. I was disgusted at myself and didn’t want to show my face at any university that read something about me, whether that was from an essay that I wrote or some overachieving introduction video that I submitted to appeal to admission officers. Western was the one school that I applied to that only knew my academic achievements and potential, so I decided I would go here, in a way, to start my life over.

For the sake of my sanity, I decided I would also step away from the medical school path, which came as a surprise to my parents. Since I was young, they had had expectations for me to either become a doctor or an engineer and when they heard about my decision, well, there was a lot of screaming to say the least. Whoops.

But I knew that I had to do it and started browsing potential programs I was interested in. I was immediately attracted to the Media, Information, and Technoculture program because I always considered myself to be a pretty good writer. I contacted a Summer Academic Orientation advisor on how I could change programs since I applied to the Medical Sciences program.

After almost two years in MIT and at Western, I feel so fortunate that my life turned out how it is now, because I’m actually happy. I write essays almost every day and I enjoy it. I learn about

philosophy and media theory and capitalism (oh, how I despise capitalism) and I enjoy it. I write articles just like this and so much more and I enjoy it. I no longer need to lock myself in my room studying stoichiometry or reaction rates, topics I hated and didn’t find useful. Most significantly, I developed a profound passion for journalism and the art of writing. I participated in as many journalism-related roles as I could, like being a Brand Journalism Coordinator for the USC (shoutout to the Comms team!).

But more than that, I was able to become the person I truly am, someone who owns up to their mistakes and learns from them, someone who isn’t afraid of being who they are, someone who no longer pretends to be someone they’re not so that people would like them. Now, I’m able to make the best of friends and surround myself with people who support and appreciate me. I guess what I’m trying to say is, life sucks. There are always going to be eerie demons hiding in the darkness forcing you to act in ways detrimental to your well-being. But there’s also always time for you to find a light switch, turn it on, and look in the mirror to determine how you want to change your actions and become who you really are.





VOICES

A LOVE LETTER TO MY ANXIETY

Anushka Goswami

Content contains conversations surrounding mental disorders.

If you've ever met me, I have definitely said some cheerful things to you, and laughed really loud. Throughout my life, I have remained a very extroverted person. I love meeting new people and becoming besties with them ten minutes later. It's who I am, and it's who I have always loved being. At some point in life, and I cannot remember when, I started feeling this overwhelming sense of despair, almost as if someone reached inside my soul and left a huge rock there. For months I could not recognize what this feeling of heaviness was, why was I constantly feeling a tightness in my chest. I found myself feeling scared, confined, like someone took my ability to speak away. I

couldn't express myself to my friends, my sister; I couldn't put into words why I was unable to function. After months of carrying my heavy rock with me, I finally found its name: anxiety.

At some point during COVID, I got diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. Disorder, I know, a big scary word that makes seeking help even scarier. Who even came up with the word dis-order, as if anything we do has any order to it (Hobbes said it first). As a child of immigrant parents, anxiety and mental health are not topics that are discussed openly at the dinner table. Due to the stigma attached to mental health, I was afraid to

navigate my anxious world with my parents. But thankfully, my parents, overcoming their own intergenerational barriers, were nothing but supportive and kind towards my anxiety. So then why did I continue to feel like I was living in a box, like day and night didn't make a difference, and breathing felt like an insufferable chore? Although I have always had trouble sleeping, sleeping was a novelty when my anxiety was high. I would find myself wishing for just a couple hours of sleep if it meant I wouldn't feel anxious.

Anxiety, like a ghost in a Shakespeare play, never seems to leave. If it's good at one thing, it's staying. Anxiety stays with you during your highest and your lowest moments. Sometimes it's dormant, and sometimes more active than Donald Trump on Twitter (before he got banned hehe). I did not wake up one day and my anxiety was gone. My heavy rock is still there, making it hard to breathe, helping me procrastinate, doubting myself over and over, I even feel anxious writing this. But I did get tired of letting my anxiety shape my life. I don't know if seeking help has worked so much for me as loving myself has.

Through finding the things I love, and sharing them with the people I love, I began loving myself. And truly loving myself meant building a better relationship with my anxiety. I may not be able to escape my anxiety, and it still remains with me like that bad Shakespearean ghost that steals the spotlight, but it's a part of who I am. The reason why I can't remember when I started feeling anxious is because I have remained an anxious person for years, and will probably continue to be. But despite the lengths of depravity my anxiety has brought me, it's a part of who I am, and I work with my anxiety, not against it.

I may not be able to efficiently go through life, but that's okay, because I'm okay with not being perfect. I still love the things I love, and still share them with the people I love, but I love them all with my anxiety.





VOICES

BETTER NOW THAN NEVER

Celine Tsang

While I am now on the verge of completing a double major in Linguistics and SASAH (School for the Advanced Studies in the Arts and Humanities), four years ago I was inches away from applying for a completely different degree. Namely, medical sciences or even nursing.

When I started high school, I quickly learned that all of the “smart” kids were supposed to be taking courses like Chemistry, Biology, or Advanced Functions. Not wanting to be left out, or worse, lumped in with those who took the courses I secretly thought were cool (like History and Creative Writing), I did the same. In fact, I went a bit above and beyond by adding an additional Health and Wellness SHSM (Specialist High Skills Major) certificate to my diploma

and completing a co-op placement at the local hospital’s chemotherapy ward. But even though I seemed to be doing everything right, I was still miserable in my STEM courses. I had absolutely no interest in what I was learning, found studying painful, always felt stressed, and was working overtime to keep my grades up. Regardless, I forged on, because what else was I supposed to do?

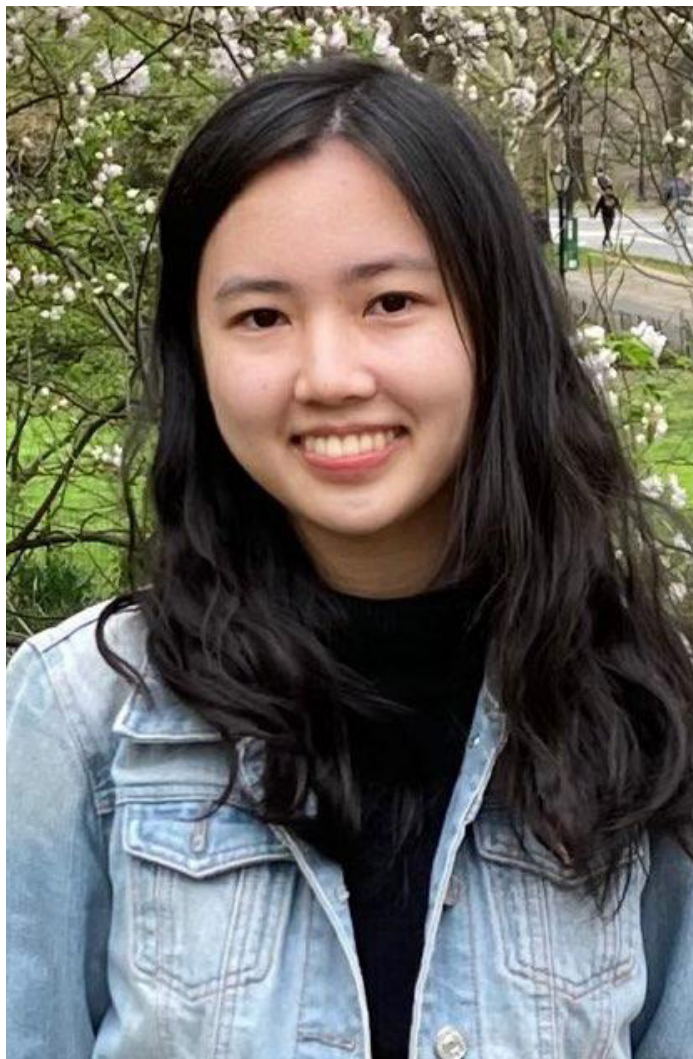
Until one day in October 2018, I turned to my seat partner in my 12U Biology class and asked if she genuinely enjoyed this course. When she sincerely admitted that she did, and in fact she loved it, by the end of the next week I was dropping 3 STEM courses and completely re-envisioning my future because I knew that it

was all wrong for me. Although I was worried about what would happen next, and my biology teacher even questioned if I would still be able to graduate when she signed off on my course switch forms, I felt sure that I was doing the right thing because I was finally being authentic to myself.

As a result, I will now be graduating with not just one, but two arts majors, with plans to attend post-graduate education. I am confident that I would have been unbearably unhappy if I stuck with the STEM pathway I felt pressured into taking, and would likely have had to switch my major later on in undergrad anyways.

Through this stressful ordeal, I learned that there are so many paths to success. Now, I understand that it was naive to think that I could have muscled through my lack of passion and inherent ability to achieve a goal I didn't care about, and that that time would have been much better spent reflecting on and working towards what I actually desire. I wish I could go back and tell my 14-year-old self that she does not have to prove her intelligence, ability, or self-worth to anybody by doing something she hates.

But even though this was a difficult time, there can be no success without some struggles along the way, and I am grateful to my past self for being brave and making a decision in the face of the risky and the unknown. And to anyone reading this who is uncertain about the path that they have chosen so far, know that it is never too late to change your mind. Better now than later, and better now than never.





VOICES

MY NON-LINEAR JOURNEY

Siddharth Maheshwari

Content contains conversations surrounding mental illness.

I've always been my own worst enemy - underestimating my abilities, downplaying my achievements and refusing to inconvenience people even the slightest when I need something. Mental illness(es) took it to another level. On good days, these characteristics are annoying; on bad days, they're crushing. I have a lot of bad days.

By the time I was 19, I had made it through more than a few major life events and traumas. I'd huffed and puffed my way through the first COVID year (my second year at Western) and was almost done, starting the final exam season. Around mid-March, I ran into Murphy's Law -

anything that can go wrong, will go wrong, at the worst possible time. My grades, which had been decent without being exceptional till that point, tanked.

I hadn't been talking to my parents for months and got into a bitter argument with my father. I feared at the time that I'd never want to talk to him again. I was holding onto my friends so tight that they were slipping away from me. I refused help, dropped out of therapy, and was only looking forward to being put out of my misery. If it wasn't for some crucially timed interventions by some close loved ones, I think that could have been the end.

It didn't feel like it at the time, but this period taught me a lot about myself. I'm not sure it made me stronger but even times of immense hardship can set markers for the future. I learned my boundaries, limits, and what kind of support I regularly need to avoid rock bottom. I look at it as a reference point in my life and it informs a lot about my self-care.

Popular understanding of mental illness is improving with the knowledge that we can't really 'fix' them or wish them away with stoicism and resilience overnight. As such, my story isn't as straightforward as a fixed point. It's temporally fluid and non-linear, like many journeys with mental illness are. I find myself struggling to just get through the day so often I question whether progress is being made. Despite all of this, I try to look at where I am now objectively, and I feel proud.

I'm consistent with my grades, starting to get published and featured with my poetry, and heavily involved in student government and advocacy. I'm part of various communities on campus, and I feel loved and affirmed in one way or another through each of them. It's not that I still don't have low points or crises but having hit rock bottom, I know I'm not there. My confidence and self-efficacy are greatly improved in the long run by virtue of the same.

This past year has not been short of struggles, but looking back, it's also left me with experiences and relationships that have been positively life-defining. I've regained a love for the subject matter of my degrees, sophed for Arts and Humanities, represented Huron and Western at an OUSA (Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance) conference, served as Huron's Councillor on USC, been involved with clubs I'm passionate about, and made friendships that have been nothing short of lifesaving.

I'm writing this story for those people who don't see a way out of where they are now or have been for a while. The light at the end of the tunnel might be far, but I promise you it's there. The light itself though, lies in the process. If I have even a modicum of satisfaction about where I am or what I've done, it's because I

opened myself up to new opportunities, new people, and new environments altogether. Western is far from perfect but it is a large institution and I truly believe everyone can find their community, and their people, here. It won't happen overnight, but I believe in you and I'm rooting for you.





VOICES

REJECTION IS REDIRECTION

Sofia Ouslis

“Hi Sofia, Thank you so much for meeting with us and interviewing for the USC Board of Directors. Unfortunately, we are not able to offer you a position at this time.”

“We would like to reiterate that this year we received a competitive pool of applicants, and the First-Year Representative Selection Committee is unable to offer you the role of First-Year Representative.”

These are just a few of the emails I’ve gotten over the years, and rejection is defeating. I know that each decision to go with another candidate was warranted, but it still stung. Coming from a low-income household, I could not afford to be spending time in leadership roles. While I

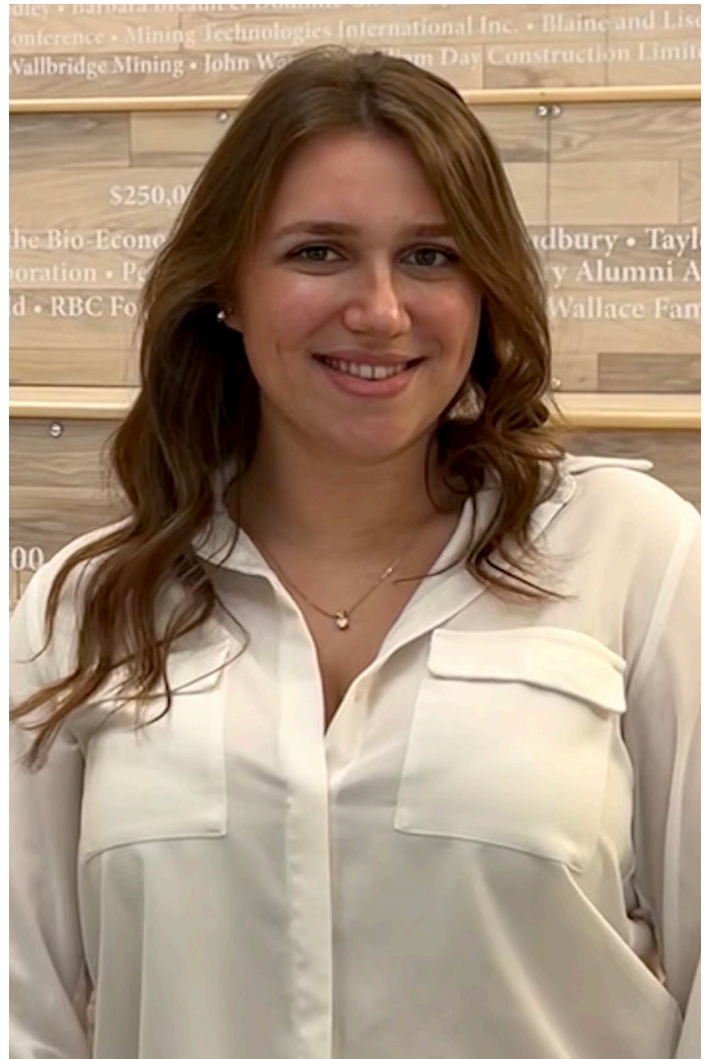
had always envied friends who played sports and led clubs, I had to work to afford groceries and pay rent. It was tough to know that those who got the jobs I wanted were student council presidents, trustees, and more – positions that I thought were unattainable.

At times, it felt as though I would never achieve what my role models had. The people I looked up to did not rely on social services for healthcare, tuition support, and food banks. I had to give up a lot; but I never gave up hope.

What I’ve learned through experiencing rejection has taught me more about leadership than any role. Picking yourself back up is a skill that only you can learn by falling - it can’t be

taught from a Ted Talk or a book. Knowing that rejection is faced by everyone makes it all the more bearable. I've internalized that "rejection is redirection" and used this as an outlook for everything in my life.

What rejection and failure can never interrupt is passion. Despite setbacks and adversity, I have just been elected as President of the Social Science Students' Council - a role I would not have predicted upon receiving a rejection as a first-year rep and not even one year ago as a Councillor. There is no leap too wide and no role too far out of reach. Adversity can hold you back, and it makes dreams feel inaccessible - but nothing can stop what you are meant to accomplish and experience.





VOICES

HOW FOOD SUPPORT SERVICES CHANGED MY LIFE

Jenna Lam

When I started my first year of university, I was determined to be the ultimate academic perfectionist. I was eager, ambitious, and hell-bent on achieving straight As in all my classes. But as the weeks went by and the initial excitement of Orientation Week faded away, the reality of university hit me like a ton of bricks. Despite my good grades, I was constantly tired, grumpy, and unable to balance my personal life with my studies. I was sacrificing everything for my grades, and it was making me miserable. I would always study so late that I would end up falling asleep in all my classes. And to make matters worse, I was far away from my family

in Manitoba, and I missed my family and their support.

However, there was one thing that kept me going: my passion for fighting food insecurity and food waste. I worked in a variety of food service jobs starting at 15, from working at Starbucks to an Asian night market, a pretzel bakery and a night bar. From these experiences, I witnessed firsthand the amount of food waste that occurred on a daily basis. Seeing this, I spearheaded a food donation program at my local Starbucks in high school so that unsold goods could be donated to local food bank

charities. I was determined to make a difference in university, too. So when I heard that Western had an on-campus food bank, I knew I had to get involved. I applied to volunteer with Food Support Services, but to my disappointment, I never heard back. It was like getting ghosted after a first date, except worse because it was a cause that I was truly passionate about. During my first year of university, I had many extra-curricular activities, but still, none of them interested me as much as Food Support Services. I felt truly unfulfilled with my extra-curriculars, isolated from my family out at Western, and always physically tired from school. I didn't know where to go from there.

By the end of the year, I realized I had to make a change. Starting with the following:

1. Sleep at least 7 hours per night. (5-6 hours is not adequate for your body!)
2. Brush your teeth AND FLOSS. (My dentist called me out at my appointment and knew I was lying about flossing...)
3. Eat balanced meals (Just Starbucks coffee at 1pm is not "lunch", and doesn't fuel your body and brain).
4. It's OK to sacrifice studying time to hang out with friends or relax, as long as everything gets done eventually.

In March, I took a leap of faith and applied to be the Food Support Services Coordinator. To my surprise, I was selected. And now, I absolutely love every part of my job. It's so rewarding to me and has helped me improve my leadership skills and make new friends along the way. Our entire team is made up of volunteers who are kind, welcoming, and passionate about making a difference. This year, we've been able to implement new programs and events. It's personally rewarding to know that I'm making a difference in someone's life, and it's also helped me become a happier, more well-rounded person overall. In short, it has changed my life for the better. By taking care of myself, my grades have also gotten better this year! There is truth to self-care, and it really can improve your whole life.





VOICES

EXPECTATIONS VS GOALS: THE REALITY

Azaad Gill

Content contains conversations surrounding mental health and eating habits.

I used to be, and maybe still am, what people consider to be a “try-hard.” In high school I was *that* guy, the one who was president of every club, did a million different extracurriculars, volunteered every week, and was valedictorian. While I don’t like to advertise this, I think it is important for setting the stage for the journey that I would like to share with all of you. The importance of your mindset when planning for the future, and even more so the importance of setting goals instead of expectations.

In high school, while I was a “try-hard”, I still had moments where I faced failure, and as someone who was normalized to succeed it hit me hard. By the time I graduated highschool, I had four driving forces; I won’t call them goals because not all of them were - instead some were expectations.

1. To get into Western University.
2. To get both my Alberta Education and International Baccalaureate Diplomas.
3. To be Valedictorian of my graduating class.

4. To be the recipient of a Loran Scholarship and be named a Loran Scholar.

Before I get too involved in my life story, I'll let you know I met the first three goals. However, I did not meet the last one; in fact I got rejected fairly early in the selection process for the award. Now you may be wondering, "So what, he didn't meet one of his goals." I'm here to let you know that for me this wasn't just a goal. This was an expectation that I put upon myself, and not meeting it meant I was a failure.

I thought I did everything you needed to win a Loran scholarship. The recommended number of volunteer hours was 1000 - I had 1500; in my mind, I was a shoe-in. It was this mindset that shifted this goal that pushed me to do better to an expectation that I had to meet to feel good about myself. Obviously this wasn't healthy, but what really wasn't healthy was the days of crying and starvation that were followed by binge-eating ice cream.

It was December 18, 2020 when my world came crashing down. School had not yet ended and it was the (not-so) perfect start to winter break, the one where I stayed in my room for four days straight. Over these four days, I fell into a depressive state. I had dark thoughts and even though I had my "try-hard" achievements I thought of myself as a complete failure who was not worthy of anything.

Now let's make one thing clear, this is not a great response to not meeting your goals. I had an *expectation* when I should have had a goal. I quickly realized that I needed to make a change and through the support of friends and family, I slowly began to understand that I still had worth. I was fortunate enough to be able to find and use a healthy support system to pick myself back up again. It's life; people will not always meet their goals, but by framing something as a goal, it fosters growth and motivation instead of a depressive ice cream binge session.

I'm sharing this story with you all because I want to share that message that you still have worth even if you don't feel like it at times. I'm also writing to share a mantra that I now use in my

everyday life as a result of this experience: "*Not meeting a goal leads to growth, not meeting an expectation leads to disappointment.*" I hope this can help you in some way, as it's helped me.





VOICES

MOVING ON AND GROWING UP

by Joudy Fichtali

I have spent my life all over the place. Literally. I was born in Lexington, Kentucky, USA, and you may wonder, how did I end up at Western University? Well, let me take you through the timeline.

My first move was in 2009. I was 5 years old, an only child, and my parents had told me that we were moving to Maryland. I don't remember much about my first move, all I remember was that I was going to miss my home and my friends.

I had started kindergarten in Maryland and became very close friends with my neighbour. I had a pet bunny and my baby sister was born. Everything was going great, a year went by and

then I was told that we were moving...again. This time it was to San Francisco, California.

I was in first grade in San Francisco, and this was one of my favorite places. I loved my school, my home, and my life there. I had a pet lizard this time due to my Tangled obsession. However, it was very short lived. Guess what? One year later and we were moving AGAIN.

Next it was Boston, Massachusetts, two years later It was Georgia, and another two years later, it was Florida.

My last and final move before coming to Western was from Florida to Halifax, Nova Scotia in 2017. This move was the hardest, at

this point I was older, I had my friends, my place in school, and I was moving to a whole new country. I remember feeling angry and hopeless; I mean, what could I do? I had to move and leave everything behind and start all over once again.

Moving constantly made me feel like I had no control over my life. I felt like I had no sense of home and no structure. Whenever someone would ask, “Where are you from?”, I never knew how to respond. The first couple years in Halifax were a very rough transition. I had trouble accepting this new reality and I felt like I wasn’t able to make any good friends. When I started high school things started to get better, and by 12th grade, Halifax finally felt like home.

Throughout high school I had always planned to go back to the States for university and had no interest in staying in Canada for school, however, halfway through 12th grade, I realized I actually wanted to stay in Canada. I had started looking at schools in Canada, and found Western University. I still applied to schools in the States, but I also applied to Western and a couple other schools in Canada. After a lot of reflecting and pros and cons lists, I decided that Western was the best place for me.

Western was the first time I got to make a decision about where I went. It was my choice to move away from home, and that felt very empowering. I love Halifax, and it is the place I call home, as I lived there for almost 5 years; but after moving so many times throughout my life, I was ready to move again. I was ready to meet new people, settle in a new environment, and this time, it was under my own conditions.





VOICES

ON NEVER GIVING UP

Raha Nemati

Coming into university, I knew I wanted to be as involved as I could possibly be. I was your classic student council leader, arts performer, and I would always go out of my way to find new opportunities to get involved. My first year was no different. My first year in MedSyd, I was part of the student council, soccer team, performed in all the coffeehouses and joined multiple clubs and various portfolios. I cherished all of these responsibilities and absolutely loved all the experiences and people I met. I knew that I wanted to go to the next step, whether that be sopping, being on a faculty council, or becoming a part of the USC. I was so inspired by all of the student leaders around me and I knew without a doubt I was going to apply to be a faculty soph.

I even helped multiple other people write their applications and I was so sure that I had a chance of at least getting an interview. I knew that my passion for the school as well as all of my previous experiences were there to back me up.

The day I found out that I didn't even get an interview I was gutted. I remember sitting in my residence room, crying, wondering what I did wrong and why I didn't even get the chance to showcase myself outside of the written application. As my friends all went and did their interviews, I felt really unmotivated and sad because I knew I had the passion, experience and tenacity to be a soph. I just felt like I wasn't given the opportunity to show it.

Three years later, I am able to say that I have been a Social Science faculty soph for 2 consecutive years, got a job with USC as AVP Programming, and have been involved in various clubs throughout my years at Western. I momentarily think back to how I was feeling at that time in first year and how that first rejection pushed me to continue to try and get involved. I am so glad that I never gave up, continued to push, and used the rejections to try even harder the next time I applied. Failures are really hard to stomach, every time I get a rejection I do feel a small sense of defeat. However, I have learned that as long as you don't let that ruin your motivation and passion, you will always end up finding something you love. You just have to continue trying.





VOICES

MY REDEMPTION ARC

Tamsen Long

I am not a stranger to failure. I actually had to take a moment to think about which failure I wanted to talk about today, in this story. I couldn't decide. So instead, I want to tell you how I learned the biggest lesson of all: you need to trust yourself.

I was always a very ambitious person. Growing up, I was always running towards the next opportunity. But back then, the opportunities for me to get involved in school and extracurricular activities were far and few between. So once I got to Western, I was the most excited for the opportunity to do everything that I set my mind to.

And my first year went spectacularly; I was my

floor representative, a first year representative of the German club, and at just about any and every student event on campus. In my second year, I wanted to take it one step further; I got a part-time job at the Spoke, became a residence soph, was the Philanthropy Commissioner for my Residence Students' Council, was Vice President Communications for the German club, and LEAPED at any opportunity that came my way. And on top of that? I was a stellar student. By the end of first semester, I had my entire university career figured out. I had a dream job lined up in Ottawa for the summer, I was going to go abroad to Stockholm University for my third year. Then I would come back in my fourth year to become president of the German club

and a Coordinator with the USC. I would run to be a Councillor on the USC for my fifth year, finish my degree in International Relations with a minor in Women's Studies, and go on to get my Master's in policy.

I didn't ride that wave too long though; about 7 months into the school year, everything came crashing down with a global pandemic.

Suddenly, I could no longer go abroad and my dream job disappeared. I couldn't cope with online school and the stress of the pandemic, and I quickly found out that I was burnt out beyond belief. Being at home made me feel miles away from my Western community. I had built a home for myself in London; now what?

I tried to get back involved, and applied to be the Gender Equality Network Coordinator. I didn't break the USC barrier, and this was the beginning of my rock bottom. I finished that semester failing a course, and I would go on to fail two other courses over the pandemic.

As I'm sure many people can relate to, the pandemic was a rough time. I felt disconnected from the university, I was isolated from my friends, and the life I had planned out for myself began to shatter. The rug was swept out from under my feet. It seemed like every opportunity, everything I wanted to achieve, was no longer within my reach.

I quickly became disillusioned with academia, and began to wonder if all of my work on campus and in class really mattered. But then I joined this amazing Women's Studies class focused on Feminist Activism. A big part of that class was volunteering with a community partner, and I was lucky enough to get to work with the Accessibility Specialist at the City of London. Suddenly, I felt like my efforts were going to make a real difference in people's lives. This course single-handedly impacted the trajectory of my life. Soon, after a full year of online school, and that class, I decided to switch programs. I could no longer stand the long lecture hours filled with political analysis on decade-old events, without anyone addressing how the

event impacted the people who lived it.

So, I became a full time Women's Studies student. That was the beginning of my redemption arc, and the best decision I ever made.

Once we got back to campus and in-person classes in fall 2021, I started to work hard, I mean really hard, to get back to where I was before the pandemic. I was still healing from burnout, so I just focused on school, my job at the Spoke, and getting my grades back up. By the end of the year, things were under control, and my summer dream job was back on the table. Along the way, I fell in love with someone who would be my rock for years to come. I started to allow myself to be ambitious again, and started to trust myself. The pandemic took a toll on my self-confidence, and it was hard to push myself to apply to prestigious opportunities. After being accepted to be a delegate at the Women In House program in 2021, I was encouraged to get involved again. I applied to two Associate Vice President roles within the USC: one of which I didn't get, the other one changed my life path.

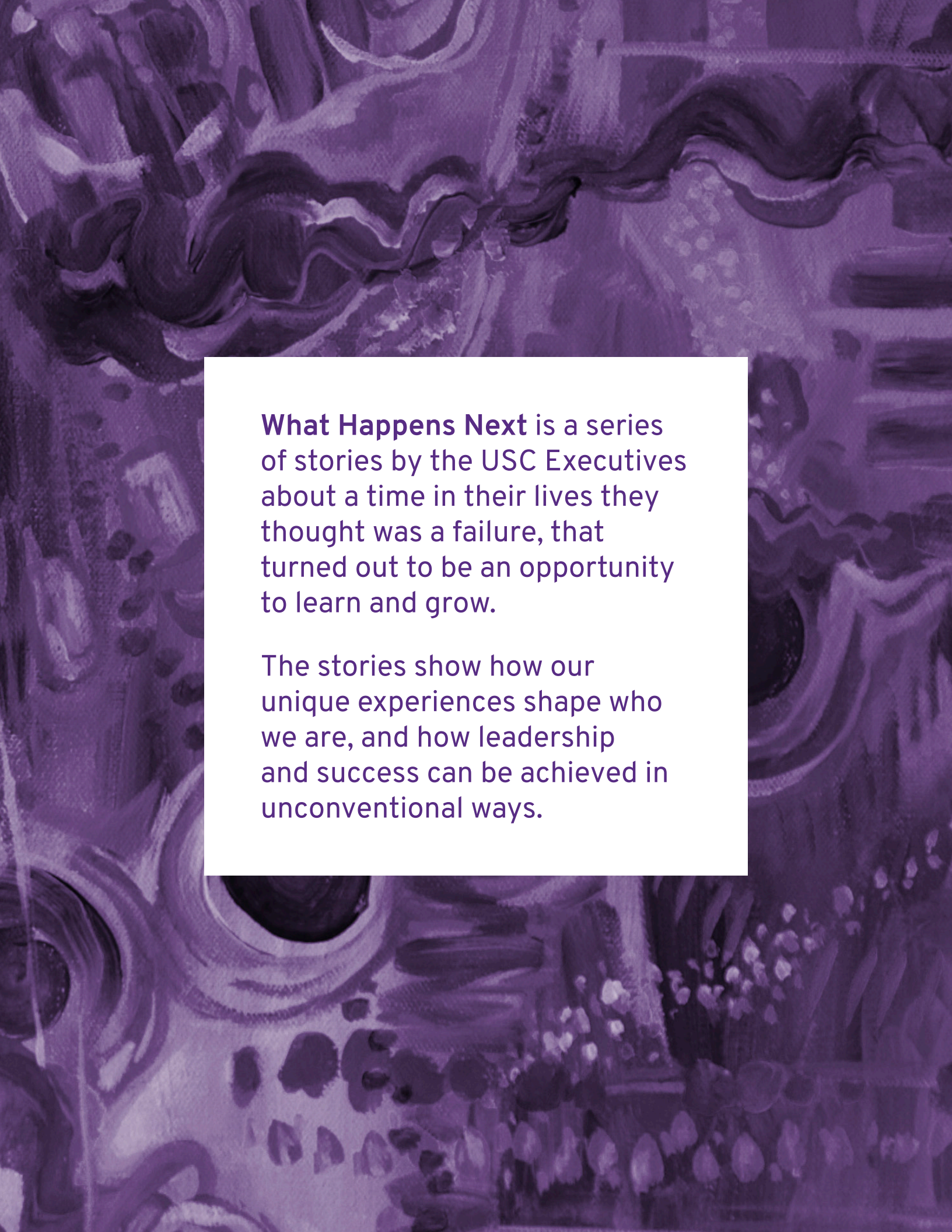
Becoming AVP Public Affairs, with no prior experience in the USC, and limited communications experience, felt like a joke to me. Me? Breaking into the USC bubble? I struggled with impostor syndrome for weeks after getting the role. I couldn't believe that after almost two years of burnout, bad grades, and pandemic anxiety, I could be worthy of such a position.

But damn, I am good at my job.

I completely fell in love with communications, and what it can do for community building. I discovered a whole new Tamsen, one who is confident, certain, and proud of her work.

Now, I finally feel like I'm back on my feet. I have a life plan, and I'm no longer scared of it being whipped out from under my feet. Because I know that if it does, I will be okay, I will find my way, and I will thrive no matter what. All I need to do is trust myself.





What Happens Next is a series of stories by the USC Executives about a time in their lives they thought was a failure, that turned out to be an opportunity to learn and grow.

The stories show how our unique experiences shape who we are, and how leadership and success can be achieved in unconventional ways.



WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Ethan Gardner

USC President, 2022-23

I was one of those annoying kids who thought he had his entire life planned out. After my first OWeek, I had decided my university trajectory, and I thought nothing could stand in my way:

Step 1: Become a Soph

I loved my time as a first year in Med Syd, and a large part of that was because of my incredible Sophs. I wanted to get more involved with the larger campus community as well as be a role model or leader for the next cohort of students, much like my Sophs were to me.

Step 2: Become a Programming Assistant (PA)

This was the sensible next step in my evolution as a student leader, and I was more than confident

that I could achieve this in just my third year. I was mistaken, but we will get to that.

Step 3: Become Head Soph

The crème de la crème in my eyes. In my first year on the Soph team, my Head Soph was Matt Reesor (foreshadowing). He was an incredibly kind and passionate leader, and our whole team of 92 seemed to turn to him for guidance, a shoulder to cry on, or just someone to have a hang with. This is what I wanted, and who I wanted, to be.

Step 4: USC President

In my first few years here, this seemed like a fantasy. Although it was something that

I wanted quite badly, I never truly knew if I would achieve it. The idea originally popped into my head when Mitch Pratt spoke at my first OWeek. He had a way to command a room which I hadn't experienced prior, he detailed all of the services the USC had to offer, and the different advocacy goals he and his team had for the year. One core belief I've held on to all these years: "Students have the power to change the world."

Anyway, with those 4 SIMPLE steps laid out, I was ready to start my journey to USC President. In February 2019, I found out that my Step 1 had been accomplished, as I received an offer to join the Social Science soph team. This year was one of, if not the most, transformative years of my life, and allowed me to learn what kind of leader I want to be, as well as grow to be more comfortable with who I am. I spent the entire year making sure to go to all of the events, constantly checking in with the leaders on the team to see if they needed anything from me, and really just positioning myself in a positive light, so that when it came time to PA hiring, I was a shoe-in.

Fast forward a few months, I didn't even get an interview. Looking back, I didn't deserve to get one, but my first taste of rejection still hit hard. I felt as though I had wasted an entire year trying to reach a goal that I failed to reach. It makes you feel like a failure, like you aren't a good enough leader or person, and that you ultimately aren't the person you thought you were. I know now that this was wrong, but it took me another year of trying to convince myself and others that I was good enough to truly be who I wanted to be.

The next year I took a very similar approach (insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome). I wanted to be Head Soph even more than I wanted to be a PA, so I spent the year being a kiss-ass, positioning myself in the best way, and convincing myself that that was enough to be a shoe-in for the role. Come hiring season, I once again failed to achieve my goal. Boy oh boy did this one hurt. A role that I not only needed in order to prove my self-worth, but it was also the only way that I thought I could make myself feel

like I deserved to run for USC President.

I took a few weeks after my rejection to really sit down and evaluate who I was, where I wanted to be, and *what happens next*. It was one of the most important moments of my young life, because it allowed me to understand what my values were. I was far too focused in the rat race that was student leadership, when my real passion lied in helping those around me. Not becoming Head Soph was the best outcome I could've asked for. Our Head Soph last year was utterly incredible at her job, and excelled in areas I knew I couldn't.

I was selected to be a PA, which allowed me to be closer to the other Sophs on my team as well as the first years I was able to interact with, ultimately bringing me back to my understanding of: "Students have the power to change the world." I left that experience with maturity, a sense of self-confidence, and an understanding that life won't always follow the path you set for it, but that doesn't mean you can't achieve your goals. As I write this sitting in the UCC 340 Offices, having achieved my final step of becoming USC President, I can truly say that failure is only a setback. You only truly fail if you do not learn and grow from your mistakes.





WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Lauren Jarman

VP University Affairs, 2022-23

Music has always been incredibly important in my life. My childhood was filled with my parents singing in the car, watching my uncle and grandfather play in a band, and loving to listen to any and all kinds of music. I was in band the minute I was able to join in elementary school, and jumped from instrument to instrument trying to find something that was the best fit for me. I found my best fit when I was in grade ten and picked up an oboe, immediately falling in love with not only its sound, but with the challenge that it presented me.

I suppose it is not entirely surprising that I found myself pursuing a music degree.

In grade twelve, I was enrolled in a co-operative education course, where I was

able to mimic being a “professional” musician, under the supervision of my high school music teacher. This was one of the most memorable courses of my high school experience, as I was able to spend most of my day practicing, studying scores, and preparing repertoire for my university auditions. At this point the expectation I had set for myself was that I would go on to study music performance, and eventually become a studio artist who would record for movie soundtracks.

I auditioned for a few schools, but the one that I hoped and prayed I would get into was Western. The oboist who was my mentor decided to go to Western to study music, and in my trial lesson I was inspired by one of Western’s

professors, Shelley Heron. When I received my offer of admission, I was elated, and immediately accepted.

The first few months of my first year were overwhelmingly exciting. I had an amazing roommate - also a music major, shout out to you Shayanne - and I was in love with the process of getting through my first year. For the first time in a long time, I was the happiest I could have imagined being.

Call it cliché, but it came to a grinding halt rather quickly.

In January of 2019, I began to feel pain in my wrist. I ignored it initially, thinking it was a result of not playing as rigorously over the winter break, and my muscles were just adjusting back to my normal routine. I would take Advil in the mornings and use Voltaren before practicing, and for the most part, I was able to ignore the pain. I made the mistake of pushing through until I was in excruciating pain without medication, and unable to hold my instrument without my thumb and fingers spasming. I went to a sports medicine clinic and their team told me I had to stop playing for four months.

Frankly, it felt like my life was over. I had played oboe everyday for almost 3 years, and now I had to quit cold turkey for the entire second half of my first year. I would miss performance auditions and my final playing jury, and be set back significantly compared to my peers.

This was only the beginning of the next three years of my journey through my degree, on and off painkillers, weekly physical therapy, as well as conversations with my private teacher about whether or not I would have to switch instruments. The latter were the conversations that hurt the most. This also meant I was now unlikely to be able to pursue a degree in performance, which at the time felt like my whole reason for even going to university and working toward a degree.

I deferred to Music Education, at the time just wanting any degree that I was able to complete, and I had the prerequisites to switch from a general music degree to education without complication. I had missed a few of the courses

in second year that would have had me working with other students in the education stream, so I felt like a fish out of water among many of my peers. I had to force myself to enjoy the first semester of my third year, still feeling behind and disappointed in the choices I felt forced to make.

But isn't it funny how life works out sometimes? Here's *what happens next*:

Turns out, I do have a passion for education. It came about in unprecedented ways, as I found my footing getting involved in student government, and developed an interest in how academics affect students. I became involved with the University Students' Council, and decided to run for Vice President University Affairs in my fourth year.

Now, I am able to come into work everyday and do what I am truly passionate about: advocacy.

It may feel like a failure at the time, but when faced with those situations that knock you down, look to what you are passionate about, and you will find your way again. If you follow what you care about, you will always find fulfillment. The rest is just the fine print.





WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Jessica Look

VP External Affairs, 2022-23

From trying a new restaurant and buying concert tickets, to applying for leadership opportunities and choosing a career path, I tend to build up my own expectations a lot. I very easily put a person, thing, or experience on a pedestal. It's not so harmful when I'm disappointed by a London Fog from a new cafe that I wanted to try, but it definitely sent me into a spiral when my carefully curated undergraduate experience fell apart, piece by piece.

I applied to Western with medical sciences as my first choice program, and biology as my backup choice. For whatever reasons my grade twelve self could come up with, I was obsessed with Western and couldn't wait to experience my undergrad here. My first "failure" was not

being accepted into medical sciences. My second "failure" was not being able to switch from first year general sciences into second year medical sciences. With the state of my grades and general apathy towards my chosen field of study, it really wasn't such a surprise.

Nonetheless, I thought I'd trudge along as a #WomanInSTEM so I could apply for optometry school. The grand idea I'd built up was that I'd be an eye doctor named Dr. Look – I'd committed myself to the pun and dreamt of running my own clinic playing off my last name. Despite being entirely uninterested and not enjoying *any* of my science courses, I truly thought it was just a bump I had to get over. In reality, I didn't know anything outside of the sciences.

Throughout high school, I took all the science classes, and eighteen year old Jessica had built up expectations for twenty year old Jessica that were frankly outdated. It was terrifying to consider anything else, and the idea of switching programs or changing career pathways felt like failure: failing my past experiences, failing my family, and failing myself.

Outside of academics, I also began idolizing Sophs and other student leaders on campus. I was enamored by the Science Sophs' OWeek getup: highlighter yellow hats, red backpacks, and of course, trademark funky lab coats. I loved my experience on the Charity Committee on the Science Students' Council, where I made some of my first friends at Western. As you can probably guess, I really, really wanted to be a part of both these teams for the rest of my undergrad. And of course, my third and fourth "failures" were being rejected from the Science Soph team and the Charity Committee Commissioner position.

January of my second year was a huge turning point for me; I came to terms with my failed expectations and realized I had to do something about it. I was terrified that I'd pick a program I didn't like or would "fail" at again. I was even more afraid to tell my friends and family about my plans, expecting them to view me as a failure and a letdown. Fortunately, I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of support I received, and I'm happy to report that I'm quite satisfied with the path I moved to. I chose to study political science because I really missed writing, and craved classroom conversation that allowed people to share and exchange personal views and experiences. I found a home in the faculty of Social Science, where I was able to explore my interest in advocacy through the Social Science Students' Council and finally got to soph with the Social Science team!

That's not to say it was smooth-sailing from there. In my fourth year, I failed a course too (if you can't tell, my study skills aren't the greatest). It wasn't my first failed course either – I'll be graduating with three Fs under my belt, if that provides anyone with any reassurance. There are a lot of personal factors that contributed to my academic struggles, but at the end of the day, I could only focus on the outcome.

It's still hard to come to terms with these failures, but I've learned how to pivot, and look toward *what happens next*. There isn't only one way to succeed, even if it is your perfect set of self-constructed expectations that you've been building up to. Throughout this piece, I've kept quotation marks around "failure" because I don't think failures are absolute. In the long run, every little mishap or failed expectation is a small step towards something better – I'm a big believer in "everything happens for a reason, and everything will work out."

First, second, third, and even fourth-year Jessica would never believe that I'd be writing this now, exposing my own failures throughout undergrad. She also couldn't have fathomed that future Jessica would be enjoying her life: finding fulfillment in her work and studies, moving on from past disappointments, and being so lucky to receive unconditional support from her family and friends.

I've been able to recover (with *much* help) from each failure and learn something new, find solace in my support system, or just embrace the process. We're all figuring it out! You're going to learn so much from the people, experiences, successes and failures that you encounter. Don't be afraid to ask for help. You're going to be okay!





WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Cameron Cawston

VP Student Support & Programming, 2022-23

Content contains conversations surrounding suicide.

I remember the day I got into Western. I was sitting in class and word started to spread that Western was sending a round of acceptances out - so I checked my email, and there it was. My golden ticket. I cried *happy tears* because I had worked hard to get where I was, and it had finally paid off.

Coming into university, I didn't know much - I was undeclared, but was excited for university to be the 'fresh start' that it was painted to be. I knew I was in - and that's step 1 right? I'd figure it out eventually.

The first few months were an exciting blur, trying to make friends, find a degree I liked,

trying to fit in.

As I progressed in school, I remember the day I received the news that someone I knew had died by suicide.

While it might not have been logical, I remember having so many feelings of regret and guilt. How could I be enjoying my time at Western, when someone else on this earth could be hurting so bad inside? It was this cycle of guilt and impossible questions that triggered my insomnia.

According to my trusty friends at Google, insomnia can be defined as: "A common sleep disorder that can make it hard to fall asleep, stay

asleep, or cause you to wake up early and not be able to return to sleep.”

I was so frustrated with myself.

How was it possible that I couldn't do the one thing my body was 'programmed' to do? University students are literally hardwired to be tired, but while I felt tired, I couldn't actually sleep.

Even when I could, I was met with vivid nightmares. Within my first semester of university, it felt like my world flipped, but that's supposed to happen, right? It's not supposed to be easy? Every teacher I had told me that in syllabus week, so this was my new reality. Right? I had very quickly convinced myself that what I was going through was normal, and that I had to push 'harder' to come out on top.

As someone who loves a good puzzle, I tried just about everything to fix my insomnia. Melatonin, putting my phone away, reading books before bed. The only issue was that on a bad night, I'd read a book from cover-to-cover. There wasn't much predictability in my insomnia, making it tough to solve my problem.

Four years out from my first semester at Western, there still isn't a fix-all for my insomnia. I still have challenging nights, but through trial and error, I'm in a place of acceptance rather than resistance. Now I try to take it day-by-day, because everything will always work out the way it's supposed to.

While I couldn't predict what my nights would be like, I could control how I spent my days. I threw myself into every extracurricular that peaked my interest and took classes that challenged the way I thought. This led me to find 2 of my biggest passions: Sophing and Thanatology. Both these programs helped me meet my best friends (Hi Core 4), find my community at Western, and taught me so much about my own resiliency. Heck, they even led me to this job!

If I could sit down with first year Cam - well, first I would give her a hug. University never 'needed' to be this hard. Treating others with kindness is

part of life, but please know you have the right to receive kindness too. I had my expectations set so high that my first year would be a 'fresh start' that when it sucked I thought that was all my fault. The only failure in my story was to myself. I didn't give myself space to breathe, a place to grow, time to figure out *what happens next*, and most importantly, room to be a human.





WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Ethan Biswurm

VP Governance & Finance, 2022-23

High school was certainly a formative period for me. Having gone through a school suspension, bad acne, and the first real heartbreak of my life, I certainly wouldn't say it was dull. True to form, high school didn't end with a somber or anti-climactic goodbye, but rather a rude awakening of the unforgiving consequences of my own actions.

I'm a Canadian citizen but up until this point I'd never lived in Canada. I'd always wanted to attend university in the "Great North" to make up for that lost time. While UofT certainly had international recognition, it seemed too boring to me and my brother was already there; I had already had enough of chasing after his shadow. Having grown up predominantly in Asia, UBC

provided a comfortable middle ground of plenty of Asian influence thanks to the immigrant population in Vancouver, while still having respectable international accreditation.

Having applied to UBC, Waterloo, Western, and others, I was excited to have received conditional acceptance to both UBC and Western. Setting my sights on UBC, I dodged accepting my offer to Western in order to have a safety option in case things went awry.

Still following in the shadow of my older brother, I had spread my time thin. Between my own various interests, as well as the commitments I felt obligated to by my brother's reputation, I started to fall behind in school. In late June,

I found out my final grades fell through the floor. With my overall score having dropped by about 20%, it was clear that I did not fulfill my conditional offer to UBC. Not only that, but it also turns out I was one point short of fulfilling my conditional offer to Western, my “safety school”.

As it so happens, my parents had planned a summer trip to Osaka, Japan, and this news came just before we were about to leave. Here’s how that conversation went:

Parents: *yelling & screaming*

Me: *excuse*

Parents: “Well! I guess you’re taking a gap year!”

Me: *silence*

Parents: *more yelling & screaming*

Me: *potential solution*

Parents: “Go get your suitcase.”

What followed was the most awkward silence of my life on our ride to the airport.

My potential solution for acceptance to Western was to appeal my grades, and pray for a 1-point bump. With no internet on the flight over to Osaka, I was trapped in a faraday cage of uncertainty as to what my next year would look like. The only thing I could do to pass the time was to incessantly review my cold rejection email from Western, with the line “*We wish you the best of luck in other places*” stuck on a loop in my head. Soon after landing, I quickly looked for free airport Wi-Fi and found that, miraculously, I had been granted the 1-point bump! I was greeted with a warm welcome email from Western, and the humour of this reversal is not lost on me.

Then, with my life clearly steering in the direction of Western, I began to make plans for London, Ontario. Eventually learning that I could not stay in student residences due to my later “re-acceptance”, I had to find Off-Campus housing despite living on the literal opposite side of the planet.

After arriving at Western, I often found myself wondering *What Happens Next?* I carried a lot of guilt with me by having ended up at Western not by choice, but by my own shortcomings. I think I still do carry some of that guilt, but I eventually took this as cause to try harder: to become as involved within the student community as I could, to pave the opportunities for myself that had been promised elsewhere, and to elevate Western to the prestige my parents thought it lacked.

At my Sophs’ recommendation, I pursued a first year representative position on the Science Students’ Council, got involved with theatre productions, and applied to be a Soph myself. Being so involved, I started to notice many of the gaps in how our campus serves students and wanted to be a part of the solution. This led me to become a USC Science Councillor, and where I am now as the USC’s VP Governance & Finance.

I often rationalize my predicament by reminding myself that “at UBC I may have been able to walk, but at Western I can *run*”. I learned to not get hung up on my surroundings, and to look at what they could uniquely offer. I hope that everyone can learn to recognize that we are not defined by our mistakes, but rather how we choose to act when faced with them.





WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

Keemia Abbaszadeh

VP Communications & Public Affairs, 2022-23

In high school I was a classic high achiever. I was a math and science kid, actively involved, and could tackle any problem except the ever-puzzling:

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Family expectations and external pressure led me to apply for engineering programs at university. Western won mostly because its first year engineering program is general; I had no idea what I wanted, so this seemed like the perfect way to find out.

To an outsider, engineering is this elusive, incomprehensibly challenging marathon, and I felt the same way from inside. As someone who had always loved learning, it was identity-shaking to dislike all my classes, with one exception. Western's infamous first-year business course was my saving

grace, and a field I had never considered entering suddenly became one I was fixated on.

I took Business 2257 the summer after first year, and though I know many who curse that course, I thrived. After a year of feeling lost, I felt like the Engineering-Ivey dual degree was created for my exact situation, and my steadfast goal became entering the HBA program.

And then, things got hard. I entered second year with my chosen discipline of Software Engineering, a stream which I frankly had very little passion for and was very frustrated by. School had a negative impact on my mental and overall health, and I could not keep up with my classmates. To put it simply, I just wanted to be out.

Engineering gave me some of my best friends, invaluable soft skills, and a solid sense of what I did not want. I don't regret a single second of those two years, and I am so excited for my friends who are becoming remarkable engineers. It just became very clear to me that it was not the life I wanted to lead.

I submitted my Ivey application on January 22, 2019. The courses I had so intensely disliked turned out to be my downfall; my cumulative average was 1.3% below the cutoff. Which is a number impossible to attribute to any one course, or any one assignment. But I did not, and refuse to now, beat myself up for that 1.3%.

The buzz of acceptances started to spread in May, so by the time the email appeared in my inbox on July 11, I already knew what it would say. *We regret to inform you that... it was an extremely competitive pool... we wish you future success.* It was a blur - but the one thing I do remember thinking is: *what now?*

I continued on, blindly accepting my fate; I would finish my engineering degree, get a job, and somewhere along the line I'd learn to love everything I hated about software. Spoiler alert: that didn't happen. I did, however, get the amazing opportunity to spend six weeks as an intern for a software development company in Madrid, Spain. I fell completely in love with Spanish culture, I was fascinated by the operation of the business, but I despised my actual work. My time in Spain was influential in ways I could not imagine in the moment, but I returned to campus with every intention of powering through engineering.

I walked into third year with my head held high, though it was incredibly short-lived. Fifteen minutes into my first lecture, I decided I was done, and began slotting the pieces of a bold plan into place. The next few days were a flurry of conversations, academic counselling appointments, and contemplating how leaving engineering would impact the rest of my life. Just your average back-to-school weekend, right?

I dropped out of engineering on September 11, 2019, making the switch into the Management & Organizational Studies (BMOS) program to pursue a double major in Consumer Behaviour and Spanish. It was a mad dash to get into new courses, and as overwhelming as it was to be among a sea of students, alone and at square one, what was truly

overwhelming was the sense that I was where I was supposed to be. This time around, I was ready; in it by myself, but also in it for myself.

Working in Spain made it incredibly clear that I had two passions, and when pushed, I found it was possible to study both at the school I had already found a home at. Not getting into Ivey was the best thing that ever happened to me. I was forced to figure out what I truly wanted. I couldn't let other people's expectations of me dictate my life; I had to start making my own decisions. And so I leaped.

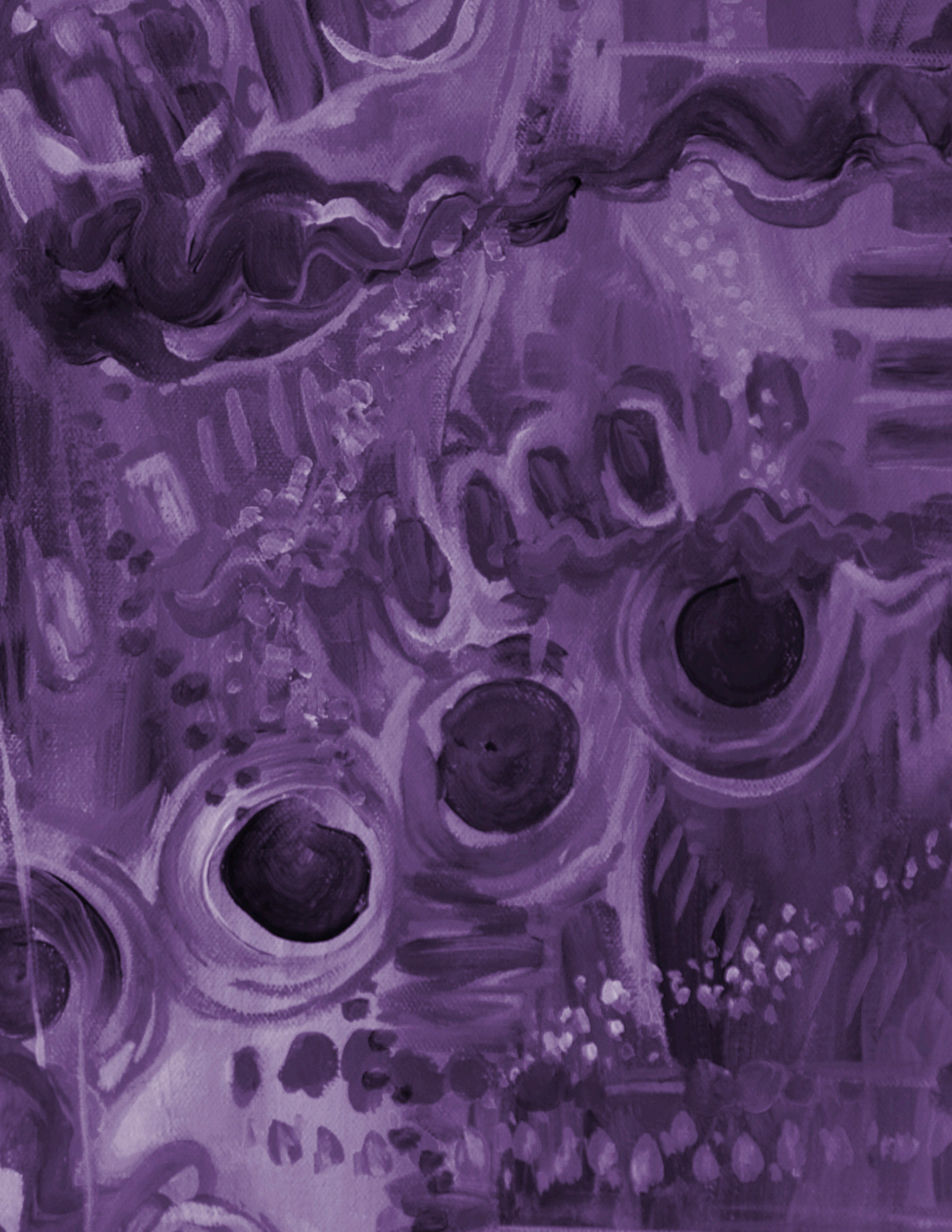
Getting rejected from Ivey was undoubtedly pivotal to who I am today. My friendships are stronger, my sense of self-worth is higher, and I got to divide my time learning two things I love. Three years later, I am more confident in my decision than I ever have been, and eagerly looking forward to *what happens next*. You have to do what's right for you, no matter how scary it is.

After switching programs I had spare time to fill, which I spent volunteering for the USC's Early Outreach Conference. I had the privilege of becoming the Early Outreach Coordinator, and it meant the world to me to work with a team who welcomed me as wholeheartedly as they believed in our mission. Wanting to continue to be involved with the USC, I applied on a whim for AVP Communications. That role taught me so much about the direction I want to take my career in, and it's how I ended up here on this year's Executive Team. Everything happens for a reason, and this is one of mine.

My overachieving high school self would never have imagined success in a non-STEM field. My miserable engineering student self would never have thought it possible to be genuinely excited about learning. My current, happy, graduated self is so proud of who she's becoming, and that she was brave enough to bet on her own happiness.

The truth is, the question is less about what I want to be when I grow up, and rather *who* I want to be when I grow up. And who I want to be is courageous, passionate, insightful, knowledgeable, bilingual; a lifelong learner and leader who creatively solves problems that matter and encourages others to do the same. In that sense, I'm still a high achiever. But my definitions of success aren't so classic anymore.







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