

“How important is your social and emotional well-being, and what aspects of your social and emotional well-being have helped you be successful?”

If you read my life’s story in a book, you’d certainly be entertained. I’ve been presented with a handful of roadblocks that tested my social and emotional well-being, beginning with my parents divorcing when I was four. Two years later, my dad went to jail for the first time. In sixth grade, I—and a gym full of my peers and mentors—watched my dad physically assault a referee during my championship basketball game. At the end of eighth grade, my dad was sentenced to two years in prison for stealing and using credit cards to fuel his heroin addiction. That same year, our house caught fire when our electrical panel exploded. As a result, our family lived on a wooden boat for the next three years in one of the rainiest cities in the United States. And just this week, I read an article on the front page of our local newspaper describing the drug distribution charges my dad received after the police seized over 3,000 fentanyl pills from his house.

In thinking through my personal well-being, I can’t help but consider the adversity I’ve experienced and the support I’ve received along the way. As I’ve grown throughout this turmoil, I’ve realized the importance of understanding my emotions and processing them in healthy, productive ways. Effectively managing my emotions and ensuring they do not hinder my daily progress has been a critical aspect of my personal growth. I’ve learned this truth through the support of my community. My family and teachers have guided me along this path and have been incredibly supportive in helping me regulate and process what I’ve experienced.

Specifically, my super-mom and stepdad offered love and support and provided a solid foundation during times of uncertainty. They believed in me and helped me to believe in myself. They had high expectations of me and encouraged me to always aim higher. They’ve helped me to see that life’s challenges could fuel my success and broaden my perspective.

Mentors like my journalism teacher and basketball coach have helped me understand that good things can come with hard work. They supported me when I attempted new challenges. With

their encouragement, I earned Alaska's Al Neuharth Free Spirit Journalism Award, a rewarding accomplishment that connected me with 50 stellar juniors across the country.

During my junior year, I bravely chose to join my high school's debate team. At the beginning of the year, I lost nearly all my debates, and my nerves limited my first Extemporaneous Commentary Competition to just 22 seconds. Up to that point, I'd only chosen activities that came easily. I surely wasn't a natural in debate. Although I wanted to give up, I was reminded that I've experienced worse, and a 22-second speech was the least of my problems, so I persisted. After a season of hard work and countless midnight study sessions, my research skills improved and I became interested in relevant state, national, and international topics. I found my place on the team and earned second place in the Alaska State Finals for Speaker Points.

Contributing to my school's first ever state debate championship increased my confidence tremendously. The public speaking skills I gained prompted me to seek leadership roles. Without that encouragement to tackle new challenges, I likely wouldn't have run for and become SBA President this year.

The struggles I've experienced may have slowed my path to senior year, but my believers and challenges pushed me to exist outside of my comfort zone. I've learned how to cultivate my potential, and I believe I am a better person as a result. I've become a leader—willing to embrace new challenges. I'm someone who understands how to push through failure. My story isn't complete, but I've discovered my own courage and have shown grit along the way. I am ready to maneuver around any of life's challenges still ahead of me with the support of others, through managing my emotions in healthy, productive ways, and by understanding the simple fact that life's challenges often become life's lessons when seen through a different lens.