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Flavian D. Brown

Flavian D. Brown was raised by his grandmother in a low-income neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. But when he was just 14, the woman whom Brown refers to as his "rock" died from liver cancer. Although stunned, Brown vowed to dedicate his life to cancer research in her memory.

Brown's home life was severely shaken after his grandmother's death, with his mother, three older siblings, and himself wrestling with mourning and rebuilding the center of their family. Experiencing such hardship during his teenage years motivated Brown. "Coming from that background fueled my desire to work as hard as I could to succeed academically," he says.

That drive has paid off. At 22, Brown has already studied with cancer researchers at some of the world's top medical institutions. He's setting his sights on obtaining a Ph.D. and helping others who come from backgrounds like his own. "I hope someday to have the opportunity to run my own research laboratory while also having access to the classroom," he says. "I want to make sure that I'm highly visible so that I can serve as a role model for underrepresented and underserved students."

Brown showed early promise, shining in science fairs during junior high. But his first chance to work in the lab came as a high school junior, when he presented a project at a city-wide science competition. One of the judges, a biochemist at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center, was so impressed with Brown's talk that she asked him to work at Rush that summer.

Brown welcomed the opportunity, and soon realized that research was more fulfilling than he imagined. "I liked the idea of discovery," he says. "I saw that if you could ask questions that were innovative and create experiments that were novel, you might discover something that had never been found before. That's always been the appeal for me." Brown spent two summers at Rush studying molecules that enhance the growth of cells and tissues.

On the basis of Brown's stellar academic record, the Posse Foundation offered him a full-tuition scholarship to Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. The Posse Foundation identifies, recruits, and trains public high school students with extraordinary academic and leadership potential and places those students in small groups, or posses, at top-tier colleges and

universities. While at Carleton, he learned how to design experiments, analyze data, and work more effectively—some of the foundations of good science. He also began piling up academic awards, eventually graduating magna cum laude with distinction.

As a sophomore, Brown was accepted into HHMI's Exceptional Research Opportunities Program (EXROP) and spent the summer doing research on non-small cell lung cancer under the guidance of HHMI investigator Stuart L. Schreiber at Harvard University. "We were interested in identifying molecules that could serve as a therapeutic for non-small cell lung cancer," he explains. These treatments, known as genotype-specific therapies, were so intriguing to him that he returned to Schreiber's lab the summer following his junior year to continue working on the project.

But cancer wasn't Brown's only interest. He was also cultivating a support network for students of color at Carleton, where he served for two years as president of the Men of Color organization and one year as an intercultural peer leader. "I often facilitated discussions regarding the academic challenges faced by students of color in science classes, and I organized study groups and devised strategies for members to improve their overall academic standing," he says. "I realized that the collegiate experience for the next generation of diverse students would be better if there were more high-achieving students of color serving as role models and mentors."

After graduating in 2009, Brown joined the Mayo Clinic's Post-Baccalaureate Research Education Program, a year-long fellowship for 10 underrepresented students that provides intensive mentoring and research training to prepare them for top doctoral programs. He's currently working with Mayo immunology researcher Diane F. Jelinek to understand the genetic and external factors that contribute to the development of multiple myeloma, a blood cancer.

With funding from the Gilliam fellowship, Brown thinks he's got a better shot at receiving an acceptance letter from the top immunology programs where he has applied for graduate school. But he's also excited to be part of the extended network of bright and motivated Gilliam fellows. "I think it will allow me to collaborate with different investigators and have opportunities that aren't available to most graduate students. And I think it will allow for collaborations that will be beneficial downstream, as well," he says. "The possibilities are endless."

Not resting on his achievements, Brown also plans to make time to help students who, like him, just need a few opportunities and role models to thrive. "When students see and interact with someone who has some sort of similarity to their background, they can get the kind of guidance they need to navigate the field," he says. "I'm interested in science and research, but I also realize that I can fulfill my desire to create opportunities and equality in education."