

**Breaking down barriers to employment for youth**

**A United Way-funded program is helping Demica find a new career path — and a new outlook on life**

A few years ago, Demica was struggling. She felt embarrassed that she wasn’t as successful as she thought she should be by her late 20s. She’d been in school to become a personal support worker, but then a financial stumbling block put her education on hold. She’d had long-term goals of joining the military or becoming a police officer, but wasn’t sure how to get there.

Demica was also a new mom and wanted to provide for her child. But as successive pandemic lockdowns kept her trapped at home, she felt increasingly hopeless and started isolating even more from her peers.

“It was a very low point and I saw no way out. I was going through depression, but I was trying to stay sane for my son and not let him pick up on it,” Demica says.

She wasn’t sure what to do with herself, but she knew something had to change. She started searching online for employment programs, but there were often financial barriers and a lack of support after completion — she didn’t want to invest in a course or program just to end up in the same spot.

Finally, during another search, she stumbled on CEE Centre for Young Black Professionals, an organization dedicated to addressing economic and social barriers affecting Black youth ages 14 and over. It was there that Demica found something positive to look forward to.

“CEE offered way more than what I expected — they don't only support your career goals, they also support your personal life,” she says.

United Way supports more than 80 employment programs across Peel, Toronto and York Region, including programs aimed at closing opportunity gaps for communities and individuals facing a greater risk of job precarity because of systemic disadvantages and discrimination — like Black youth, who experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. We also provide funding for CEE and more than 20 other Black –led, –focused and –serving organizations to deliver programs and initiatives centred around inclusive employment and youth development.

At CEE, Demica was connected to an intake coordinator who helped her figure out the right program for her. While Demica wanted to move forward, she specifically wanted a career where she would be able to have long-term flexibility to take care of her son, so when the intake coordinator recommended the Professional Mortgage Underwriters Program, she followed their advice despite not being familiar with the sector.

“I didn’t even have a clue what a professional mortgage underwriter was, but the intake coordinator thought I’d do well in it,” Demica says.

The program only accepts five people at a time, and Demica was initially waitlisted. Her acceptance into the program came at the last minute, so she hadn’t been able to arrange childcare for her son — but that wasn’t a problem.

“They were so nice about it. My son was able to be with me while I was on the video call with them and everybody was conversing with him,” she says. “They were truly like my extended family.”

In addition to training opportunities and professional development, United Way funds programs that make sure participants have the support they need to succeed. As Demica was getting help building her resume and networking, she also had access to psychotherapy, gift cards and more. And completing the program doesn’t mean her relationship with CEE ends. The graduates continue to be connected to job opportunities and have access to supports for several years.

“This is definitely the best program I've been through since I moved to Canada. They cover everything a person might need to transition from not working and into a new career,” she says.

Demica has graduated the program and is excited about her new career path in a field that once mystified her — one that will also allow her to provide for her son. She has taken her professional certification, and now Demica is ready to take on a new career.

“This program made me realise that just because other things didn't work out for me, it doesn’t mean that I have to stop here,” Demica says.

“I can't imagine where I’d be without United Way’s support. I might still be where I was, still searching around the internet, jumping into programs that weren’t truly a benefit to my personal life and my career goals. This program definitely turned things around for me.”