

# Wow-ing the World with Academic Excellence, In Spite of Living in Impossible Situations

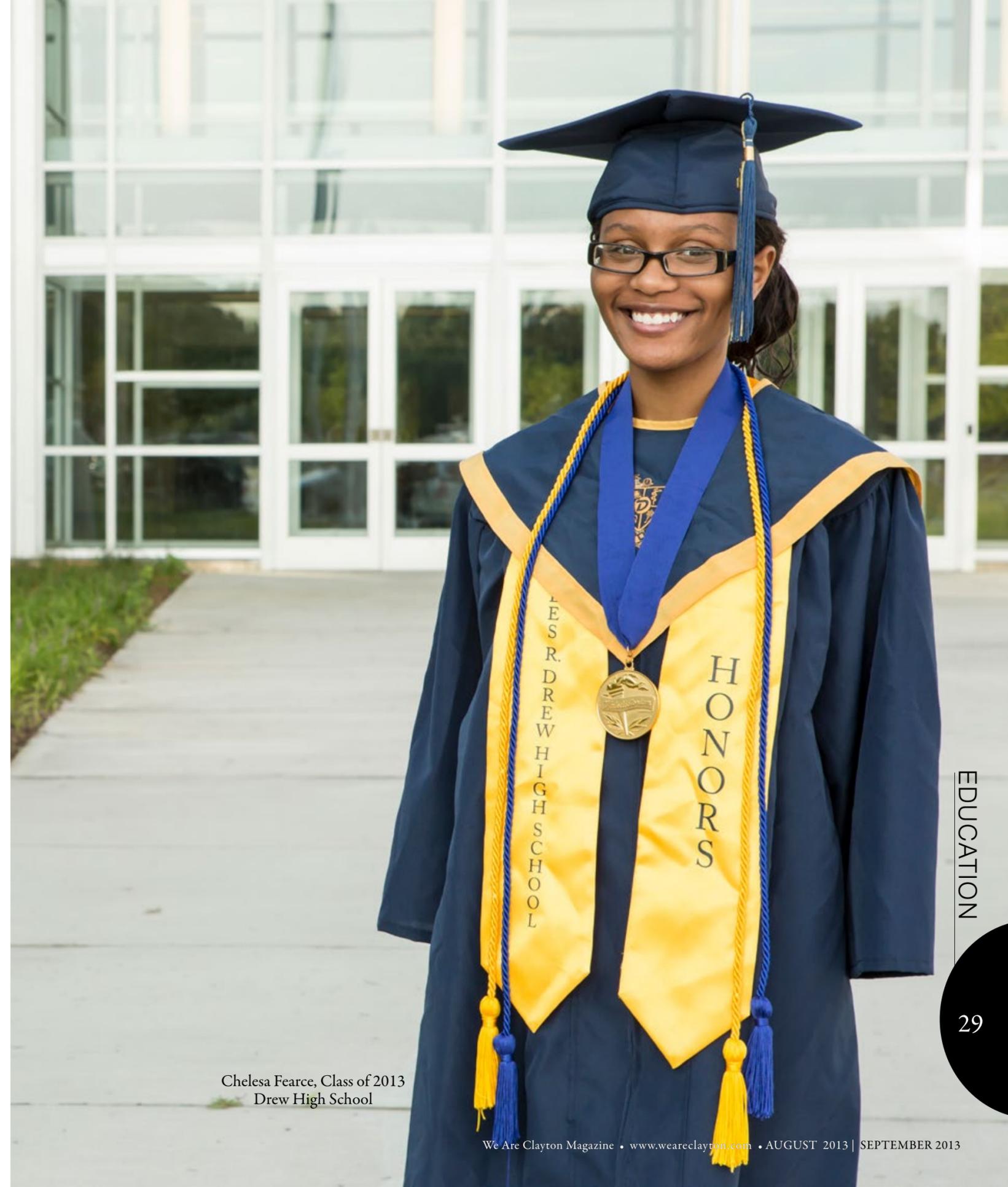
THE INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEY OF A YOUNG  
WOMAN, CHELESA FEARCE

By Kimberly Allen

Photos by Michie Turpin

If you're in a situation where you feel like you want to give up, try to figure out your purpose in life. Especially in high school; you'll get pressure on a lot of things and you don't really know who you want to be. Don't give in to everybody else, just live your life and keep studying.

This mentality is what got Chelesa Fearce through some very trying times in her young life, and now she is not only playing at the top of her game, but ahead of the curve.



Chelesa Fearce, Class of 2013  
Drew High School

After several whirlwind weeks of interview requests and appearances on radio and television programs, *We Are Clayton* magazine finally got to chat with our local celebrity. "It's been hectic," shares the seventeen-year-old. "I'm not tired of the interviews, but I am a little tired of getting up for those early morning shows," she says through laughter. Fresh off her most recent photo op and tour of the Governor's mansion with Nathan Deal, Chelesa was enjoying her final weekend of freedom before beginning a paid summer internship at a doctor's office. "Hopefully I'll get to see some patients," she adds with a smile.



Just in case you've been out of the loop, Fearce is the phenom who wowed the world with her story of what one can accomplish with good old fashioned hard work, sheer determination, and a tight knit family that made a home wherever they were.

### THE BIG C

"I wanted a better opportunity for my kids," explains mother Reenita Shepherd when asked why she relocated to Georgia. "I was a foster child, and wanted to move somewhere that I could climb and grow."

Shepherd did just that, eventually finding a job where the employer paid for her to attend college. But while working towards a bachelor's degree, she began feeling tired more often. Given her busy schedule and raising daughters Chelsea Shelton (18) and Chelesa alone, Reenita brushed those feelings off until she could no longer ignore the signs.

"For about one year I just wasn't feeling well and didn't know what was wrong with me. I started having boils all over my body and had maybe ten at one time. I had so many I couldn't sit down," she explained. "I had to go back and forth to the doctor to get them cut open." After several tests with different doctors, Reenita was finally referred to an oncologist, "and that's when I found out I had cancer."

According to Shepherd, this diagnosis set off a chain of events which led to five years of homelessness.

### HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

After getting laid off in 2006 and with no money saved, Reenita ultimately lost her home. She tried sending the kids to live with family in Mississippi – but her daughters weren't having that. "I wanted them to stay there while I got back on my

## "Everyone knows someone who has died from cancer, maybe I'll find the cure."

feet. But they kept calling and saying they wanted to be with me, so I brought them back [to Georgia]." New jobs came and went due to a bad economy, forcing them into several transitional facilities over the years, including stays at Clayton County's Hope Shelter. In the midst of all this came son Nicholas (5) and daughter

Cayleigh (4). The family rented apartments for short periods of time here and there, and when they had a car, lived in that for a while.

Such setbacks may have caused many people to give up. But these struggles only made Chelesa more determined to forge a better path for her future.

Fearce soon discovered Clayton State University's (CSU) dual enrollment curriculum through her high school guidance counselor, and jumped at the opportunity to advance academically. This program, which requires a 3.5 GPA and a minimum of 450 on the SATs for both reading and math, allowed her to take college courses during the last two years of high school. But perhaps just as important, it gave Chelesa firsthand experience at college life, as well as a temporary escape from reality.

"The kids in high school knew about me going to [CSU] but they didn't know we were homeless. This allowed me not to have to be around certain kids, because kids can be cruel. They talk when you don't have the best clothes or best shoes, and CSU's dual enrollment program allowed me to be around college students who don't care as much about stuff like that," Fearce clarified. She also found the campus an ideal place to study and enjoy some private, quiet time.

Everything changed again for this family once the C-Tran bus service ended. Since Reenita preferred a Clayton County Public School education for her kids, she had to pay for alternative transportation. This not only meant incurring another household expense, but the girls would get back to the shelter late, leaving

very little, if any, study time. "The lights had to be out by 8:00 p.m., and I got home at 9:15 p.m. some nights," explained Chelesa, who improvised by using the light from her mother's cell phone to read textbooks and study.

Amazingly, not many people realized this family was homeless, with most finding out only when the story went public. "My friends mentioned after seeing the news that they couldn't judge a book by its cover, because I didn't look poor," said Shelton. "My classmates didn't know because I always kept a smile on my face."

"I didn't really get that time to hang with friends during school because we didn't have a house for them to come to," added Chelesa. "Luckily they never asked to come to my house. I was thankful for that so I didn't have to explain."

Life is currently on the upswing. With Reenita's cancer now in remission, the family has been renting an affordable Forest Park home since February, providing the girls with some much needed stability during their final months of high school.

But regardless of their living arrangements, Mama Shepherd always encouraged education, and her words did not fall on deaf ears. Shelton's hard work earned her a 3.5 GPA, the Salutatorian honor at her Atlanta high school, and a full scholarship to the University of West Georgia; while Chelesa served as Valedictorian of Charles R. Drew High School boasting a 4.5 GPA. And it has been a nonstop ride ever since. "I'm very proud of both of them," their Mom praises.

Next up for Fearce is a full ride scholarship to Spelman College, where she will enter as a junior. It should come as no surprise that this young lady plans to study medicine to become an oncologist after witnessing her mother's health issues. "Everyone knows someone who has died from cancer," she states. "Maybe I'll find the cure."

Considering all this young lady has already accomplished, that wouldn't surprise me at all.



Chelesa Fearce with mother Reenita Shepherd

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# Save The Dates

**August 15, 2013**  
Spotlight Luncheon

**November 21, 2013**  
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**May 15, 2014**  
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