Joshua Gaskins knows what it’s like to overcome adversity. Born and raised in Baltimore and Los Angeles, Gaskins learned quickly what it meant to be a black male in a diverse and turbulent city, and that politics can shape a person’s chance at mobility.

In June, Gaskins will graduate from the University of Denver with a BA in political science. He hopes to use his education to give back to communities like Baltimore and Los Angeles where “the statistics are staggering in the black community.”

“Growing up at the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum allowed me to witness a side of America that most Americans are unaware of,” said Gaskin. “This had a strong effect on me and motivates me to work hard and want to help other young African-American males that might be on the wrong path, similar to my situation.”

Struggling to make sense of the limited opportunities for black men in America in the realms of higher education and politics, Gaskins found inspiration in former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

“Even though we differ in ideology, I respect the fact that she was able to achieve and become such a powerful figure in American politics being an African-American woman,” he said. “I had the pleasure of hearing her speak when she came to DU’s Korbel International School and was very impressed by the way she articulated herself and spoke about her experience in the White House. I knew from that moment that I wanted to take my political science degree and apply it in politics and social justice.”

Gaskins’ motivation for political reform and social justice was the impetus for his honors thesis, in which he looked at the overrepresentation of young black males in special education programs.

“This has been a phenomenon ever since 1975 and I researched how and why this placement of young African-American males occurs and affects their academic and life outcomes,” Gaskins said. “There is a large amount of scholarly work already engaged in this study, and I hope to further add context as well as analysis as to why they are being placed in these least restrictive environments.”

According to Nancy Wadsworth, associate professor of political science, Gaskins overcame a great deal of adversity to get to DU.

“In many ways it is a miracle that he made it here—but that is so much a testament to his intelligence, tenacity and resilience. He is one of the most intellectually curious and hard-working students I’ve ever had,” she said.
In 2015, Gaskins was selected to represent the DU political science department at the 56th Annual U.S. Airforce Academy Assembly, where students from universities around the country met with top military officials to discuss Russian and American politics.

“This opportunity has further motivated me to be involved in domestic as well as international politics,” he said. “Being able to interact one on one with top officials and discuss ideas has further motivated me to enter a career that will allow me to influence and implement policy change.”

Gaskins future plans are to attend law school and ultimately work in domestic politics and social reform.

“I hope I get to watch him make waves in the world for years to come,” said Wadsworth.