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HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

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March Madness — With A Stethoscope

Just as March Madness grips sports fans across the country, another spring March tradition with the same excitement awaits the fates of 177 medical students with Match Day. At precisely 11 a.m. (CDT), Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) School of Medicine fourth-year students opened their envelopes simultaneously with students across the country to reveal where they will spend the next three to seven years as residents and what specialty they will pursue for their professional career.

Match Day is a nerve-wracking event that has played out on medical school campuses across the country since 1952. Months before Match Day, students begin applying to residency programs in their preferred specialties. Students visit sites to evaluate and ultimately rank their preferred residency programs. At the same time, administrators at each site interview and rank applicants.

The National Resident Matching Program coordinates this process and makes the final match algorithm, which is designed to produce results for students to fill the thousands of training positions available at U.S. teaching hospitals.

This year Steven L. Berk, M.D., TTUHSC executive vice president of clinical affairs and dean of the School of Medicine, said for most students it has been an eight-year journey or longer, intense study and clinical training, a lot of discipline and self-sacrifice and the additional challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since October, they have been interviewing by Zoom to determine which program works best for them.

“This class went through the third- and fourth-year, doing their clinical rotations at the time of COVID,” Berk said. “And so that's difficult enough to be introduced to the wards, after the first two years, but they were introduced to the clinics and wards during the pandemic with everyone wearing masks; and a concern for their own health and safety. And yet, by all our measurements, this class is outstanding. Their knowledge base has not been affected in any negative way by the pandemic, and their enthusiasm for medicine, if anything is greater, fueled by the pandemic and the pride that they have in the profession of medicine.”

This year, TTUHSC School of Medicine students matched to institutions including UT Southwestern (10 students), UCLA, Brown University, Dartmouth, Mayo Clinic, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland Clinic, Mount Sinai and George Washington University.

Of the 177 TTUHSC students, 19% matched at one of the 22 TTUHSC programs; 57% are remaining in Texas; while 52% of the students matched to a primary care residency program.

“Our students receive a quality education and provide exceptional health care across the country,” Berk said. “This was the first year that the AAMC did a survey, where they asked program directors all over the country to rate students from specific medical schools, students that were in their residency program. And 38% of our students were rated as exceeding expectations from program directors. That was an outstanding report that showed us that we're really training medical students in the best possible way.”

Single Father and Medical Student

Nick Garza – Matched (Preliminary) TTUHSC Lubbock, Diagnostic Radiology – Integris Health, Oklahoma City

In January 2016, Nick Garza was in his last semester at the University of Texas at Austin when his wife Melissa started having physical symptoms that were concerning. She was diagnosed with stage II-B cervical cancer. The next three years included treatments, countless doctor's appointments, all while he finished school and applied to medical school — something they sacrificed for as a family.

“She wanted me to continue my pursuit of becoming a physician. I was accepted by Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center School of Medicine and my wife really wanted to come here, despite her health problems and then being diagnosed as terminal. She was able to see me attend my White Coat Ceremony, but sadly about two months later she passed away.”

Shortly after Melissa's death, Nick met with Dr. Berk and talked about his plans for the future. After the support he received from the school, he decided to continue on with medical school. In addition, classmates and faculty gave their daily support by providing meals for the bereaved family and helping watch his 4-year-old daughter Caitlyn when needed, especially as his family went through their grieving process. Nick's parents also would come from Austin to help.

In March 2020, the pandemic created new challenges. He and his daughter moved to virtual learning. As Nick studied for medical school, he also was a kindergarten teacher to Caitlyn. At the same time, he was intensively studying for his Step 1 of the U.S. Medical Licensing Examination, which is the first of three exams required for medical licensing in the United States.



Now as a fourth-year student, Nick wants to specialize in diagnostic radiology and pediatrics. He credits the early exposure he had with his family who are in health care and the experiences he had at TTUHSC for guiding him to find his specialty. Nick said getting through medical school after his wife's death has been difficult, yet he is proud of his resilience and grateful he will have a job as a physician.

“It has been pretty challenging. It takes a village to raise a child for sure. And in my instance, it took two. I felt the best way to honor my wife was to just continue going on and being open and honest about my situation. Having a child, you do everything for them as a parent, and just try to do everything you can to guarantee their success. I think that is probably one of the biggest things that kept me going was my daughter.”

From Ghana to Physician

Briget Hyde – Matched UPMC Medical Education, Pittsburgh – PM&R

Born and raised in Ghana, Briget Hyde remembers as a seventh grader, working in her community to provide preventative health care education. On weekends, she and her classmates would distribute mosquito nets to help with the prevention of malaria, teach the importance of boiling water to kill germs and provide other health education.

Hyde and her family moved to Houston when she was 14 years old. She would later attend the University of Dallas and major in biology.

“The idea of becoming a doctor was not something that I thought of before coming to the United States,” Hyde said. “It was more of what can I do to prevent getting sick? And how can I help people to do that? I think when I came to the United States, I saw that I could do this through medicine. And it also combined what I really loved which was service and leadership. And those were really two things that were kind of instilled in me growing up. And I'm really grateful for that because it has really held me grounded throughout medical school and things that I'm passionate about.”

Hyde will specialize in physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) and become a physiatrist. She said it is referred to as the hidden gem in medicine because physiatrists take care of people at their most vulnerable times.

“The goal of this field is to promote function and independence, really at a time when people's lives have changed,” Hyde said. “Some people are going through an amputation or really devastating surgeries. For me, I was drawn to PM&R because it promotes the quality of life. Growing up in Ghana, quality of life was really important to me. I saw people who were cast away by their families because of disabilities through birth or through accidents because people did not have an understanding of disabilities. Through my medical training, I was drawn to experiences that promoted the quality of life. And when I found psychiatry, it did exactly that. I also was able to explore leadership in terms of advocacy for people with disabilities.”

Hyde is excited to continue this new journey as a resident. But she said ultimately, she would like to come back to Texas to practice.

“Looking back I am grateful for Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center and for the opportunities and the people that I have met along this journey. I have been able to thrive much more than I could have even imagined and I don't think I would have been able to do that elsewhere. People have opened their doors and arms to me. And I'm just really grateful.”

A Couple and a Double Match

Caroline Freedle – Matched University of Oklahoma – General Surgery

Partick Bettiol – Matched University of Oklahoma – Orthopaedic Surgery

Four years ago, during the White Coat Ceremony, Dr. Berk addressed the incoming class and said “Some of you may meet your spouse in this class during medical school.” The statement gets a laugh but for two students, Patrick Bettiol and Caroline Freedle, it came true.

Both were in the M.D./MBA program and met in their first semester.

“I had broken my finger and it was splinted,” Freedle said. “And he came up to me and asked what was wrong with it and I said it's broken. But I was more interested on focusing on my academics and starting medical school. Unfortunately, or fortunately, he continued to bother me. We built a really good friendship over the summertime. And then in the fall of our first year we started dating.”

Freedle is originally from Kerrville, Texas, outside of San Antonio, and knew she wanted to major in health care. She completed her undergraduate degree at Texas Tech University in kinesiology. Patrick was born in upstate New York, but said he is a Texan through and through after moving to College Station. He completed his undergraduate at Tarleton State University, also in kinesiology.

“I was injured playing football in college,” Bettiol said. “And after surgery, not knowing really what I was going to do, it was during my rehab process, I noticed the impact that it had on me, for me to be at a point where I couldn't really lift my left leg to a point where I'm back running, sprinting, again, playing with my teammates. I wanted to be in a position where I can do that for other people, too.”

When choosing TTUHSC, both agree, the school was the best option.

“The culture is friendly,” Bettiol said. “It's a culture of I have your back; faculty has your back; your fellow students have your back; and administration listens.”

Freedle will specialize in general surgery and Bettiol in orthopaedic surgery, both extremely competitive specialties when it comes to matching to a program. They surrounded themselves with friends who also had completed a prior match as couples.



“There were a lot of moments of stress, Bettiol said. “Matching as a couple is extremely difficult to do. But when we reflected on it, we just were able to know the intention of the other person so well, to say, this is what you want to do, and I'll support you and am behind you 100%, let's just go after it.”

Freedle said keeping their individual goals at the forefront was important.

“They are two competitive specialties. And sometimes, we were asked, ‘Do one of y'all want to pursue another route? And what happens if you don't match into these specialties? What are your backup plans?’ Those are things that we did think about, but also really just going after our goal. There isn't another option. This is what we want to do. And I think when we had that mindset, we had a path that we were able to go down to meet those goals.”