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The Immokalee Foundation's first medical doctor is ready to give back

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY



Kristen Dimas during a class at the Florida State University College of Medicine. COURTESY PHOTO

The graduation of the first medical doctor among The Immokalee Foundation students shows that an investment in the education of one person also can improve the lives of many others.

Dr. Kristen Dimas earned her doctorate degree earlier this year after completing her studies at Florida State University College of Medicine. She is now a resident at Lee Health in Fort Myers, continuing to gain experience and knowledge by participating in rotations from pediatrics to general surgery, obstetrics to emergency medicine, and other facets of family medicine. In addition, she cares for her own roster of patients in the FSU

Medical Clinic, many of whom have low incomes and little or no medical insurance.

"We're a safety net clinic," Dr. Dimas says. "I have a lot of patients, and we get more every day." In an average afternoon, she adds, she sees four to six patients.

Despite the very full schedule at the clinic, she says the hours she spends there are ones she enjoys the most. "I'm really interested in helping underserved populations," she says. Having grown up in Immokalee, she is familiar with the difficulties people often face when needing medical treatment in a low-income community.

Dr. Dimas' own educational journey has not been an easy one. At Immokalee High School, she more than mastered the academics, graduating as valedictorian of the class of 2008. With a one-year Direct Scholarship through the TIF College Success program, she was off to a great start as an undergraduate at FSU. But the economy was faltering. Her father worked in construction and was feeling the pinch, while her mother, who completed college herself when Kristen was 14, was laid off from her job in accounting.



Kristen thought she would need to quit pursuing her education and DIMAS go to work to help her family, which includes three younger siblings.



But TIF had been a source of emotional support and solid advice as well as financial help, so she reached out. The foundation team and friends advised her to reapply for a scholarship. She received a four-year award, which changed her

entire family's outlook on the future.

"The support I have received from The Immokalee Foundation has been a tremendous help," the young doctor says. "All through school, I've known I could always count on them."

Her own determination has been a factor as well.

Dr. Dimas has continued to seek opportunities for advice, experience and financial help. Medical school tuition at FSU costs nearly \$30,000 per year. Her experience in TIF programs was an advantage in helping her to find a way to afford such an advanced degree. TIF students learn valuable skills like networking. Because of this, she found it easy to meet peers at a medical conference, where another student told her about a program that could further fund her education.

Once she completes her three-year residency in family medicine, Dr. Dimas will work for three years for the National Health Service Corps' Students to Service program, in a community lacking in medical professionals – such as Immokalee. In exchange, she will be awarded enough money to nearly pay off the debt she acquired going to medical school.

It's not surprising that Dr. Dimas' advice to today's TIF students is that they never give up on their dreams. "It gets really hard, and you will have a lot of people who make you feel like you can't do it because of the area you come from," she says. "Others will say you only got where you are because of where you come from and the help you received. Remembering where you started and where you want to go will keep you determined and focused."

TIF provides a range of education programs that focus on building pathways to success through college and post-secondary preparation and support, mentoring and tutoring, opportunities for broadening experiences, and life skills development leading to economic independence. To learn more, call 430-9122 or visit www.immokaleefoundation.org.