



A LIFESAVING OPPORTUNITY

By Donna Koehn and Katherine Smith

As a little girl, Natasha Spencer dreamed of a career in medicine.

Someday, she hope-hope-hoped, she could become a certified nursing assistant like her mother. She harbored no illusions that girls could become doctors, especially not little girls growing up in Tampa's crime-ridden Ponce de Leon housing complex.

On May 23, Spencer crossed the stage to receive her medical degree from Florida State University, and then headed straight for the two men who made it possible.

Former Buccaneer linebacker Derrick Brooks saw Spencer's potential before she knew she had any. Brooks' golfing buddy Stuart Lasher, a private equity investor and Tampa philanthropist, picked up the tab for every expense she incurred in med school, including tuition. That aid will continue while she completes her residency in obstetrics/gynecology in Alabama.

Seeing her middle school friends getting pregnant and dropping out helped Spencer discover her calling.

"My plan is to come back to practice in Tampa, mainly

focusing on gynecology to help young girls take control of their health," says Spencer, 26.

Spencer met Brooks when she was 12 years old during his visit to her neighborhood Boys & Girls Club, her favorite hangout after school. It was 1997, when he was formulating his plan to start Brooks Bunch, a program for at-risk children. Brooks Bunch in turn launched Derrick Brooks Charities, an ongoing effort to help Florida's children.

Brooks Bunch has been replaced with the First and Goal Program, which has helped about 100 young people graduate from college, with 65 more enrolled. Spencer says she recalls being less than impressed at first when told that Brooks was visiting her Boys & Girls Club. "He didn't seem very big for a football player," she says.

As a charter member of Brooks Bunch, she went on her first airplane trip – to Fort Lauderdale. Soon, the group traveled to Washington, Atlanta, then to South Africa in 2000. The goal was to show students, 35 to 50 at a time, a world beyond their crumbling neighborhoods.

Spencer went on to graduate in the top 10 percent of her class at Tampa Bay Technical High School, where she lettered in three varsity sports. She was accepted at FSU and graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree, with Brooks' financial help. Before medical school, she accepted a six-month Fulbright scholarship to teach teenagers in Thailand.

In her late teens, Spencer once giggled and hid her face as she delivered a speech about Brooks Bunch to a group of educators. Now she's a mature, poised young woman who has experienced the joy of delivering babies during her medical rotation.

"I'd be up at 2 or 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning with first-time mothers, and everyone would tell me to go home," she says. "But I was just so excited and it was just so amazing. I will always remember those women, and they will always remember me."

Doug Carlson, spokesman for FSU's medical school, says the debt incurred by students causes many of them to go for high-paying specialties such as dermatology or radiology. Fewer want to become primary-care doctors.

"Our mission is to produce physicians who will work with medically underserved populations," he says. "We know one good way to do that is to identify and recruit students from backgrounds underrepresented in medicine.

"Natasha is proof that with the right encouragement, we can help diversify our physician workforce, which may lead to better health outcomes for people who face great health disparities."

Lasher, who heard about Spencer from Brooks, says his Stuart G. Lasher Foundation supports a number of nonprofit groups. But meeting a person who directly benefited from his financial help was overwhelming, he says.

He also is moved by the notion that by helping her, he starts a ripple effect as she repays the favor.

"I had tears in my eyes looking at the joy on her face at graduation," he says. "She has the ability to save people's lives. And yet there has never been any sense of entitlement on her part. She's always gracious and grateful."

No father could have beamed more proudly than Brooks as Natasha became Dr. Spencer at graduation. Brooks, who graduated from FSU and [until recently was] on its board of trustees, sat on the front row with Lasher. Letitia Spencer also traveled to Tallahassee to see her daughter graduate.

"It was an emotional moment," Brooks says. "When she hugged me after, it made me think of when this thing started, and it brought back memories of a lot of the kids and all that they've accomplished. That moment was bigger than the two of us."

A second Brooks Bunch member also has started medical school, he says.

"Natasha went out and succeeded in doing what she said she was going to do. The sky was the limit and she went for it.

"That is one of the things that I'm most proud of, and it

does have a special meaning for me. She set the bar high, and now she's going to throw the rope back. Now these kids who are growing up in situations like Natasha have a visual and can see she achieved this and it's an achievement they can touch.

"What I'm going to be most proud of is when she comes back to her neighborhood and helps out, and she will. She has never gotten caught up in her own vision. Along the way, it's always been important to her to help others and not just herself."

Spencer says she would have been a different person on a different path if not for Brooks.

"Derrick has been like a father to me, an older brother, a confidant and a friend," she says.

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- DERRICK BROOKS



COLIN HACKLEY