

A WHITE COAT FOR ALL

American patients often prefer American physicians. Female patients often prefer female gynecologists. Spanish-speaking patients often prefer physicians who speak Spanish. It's not about prejudice; it's about comfort. Research indicates, and our hearts tell us, that we often feel more at ease when our doctors resemble us.

What do we say, then, to the patients in America's waiting rooms who would prefer to be treated by a black man? "Come back in several years"?

The fact is that black men are underrepresented in U.S. medical schools and medical practice. Some of them figure that an M.D. degree is an option for others but not for them.

Yet some black men do choose the field of medicine and succeed. Those are the ones who interest me. For a master's research project earlier this year, I focused on a handful of them. Not on the barriers that could have kept them out of the medical field but on the factors that helped them get in. Not on the bad news but on the good news: They made it ... and if they can, other black men can, too.

I interviewed 10 black male students at the College of Medicine and three black male physicians associated with the college. They spoke about the contributors to their success. It was a privilege to hear their stories.

They all belonged to the same stereotyped group, but their lives had been anything but the same. Some came from stable homes; at least one had been homeless. Some had experienced racial prejudice; others had been sheltered from it. Some breezed through school and the MCAT exam; others struggled. Yet somewhere along the way, someone – whether a parent or a teacher, a coach or a doctor, their church or their culture, an outreach group or an inner voice – told them that if a career in medicine was what they wanted, and if they really worked at it, they could succeed. Then a whole network of people encouraged and supported them – just as several of them mentored

me during our interviews because they saw a young black man pursuing the same path they had chosen.

Like many of them, I grew up with challenges: divorced parents, limited resources, a rural county with little access to health care. I am here now, in my first year of medical school, thanks to a long list of contributors. My parents, who always stressed education's power to open doors of opportunity. My brothers, who taught me about life by their example. My middle brother's physicians, who impressed me with their commitment to his care. My teachers, who made school a world of inspiration. The SSTRIDE outreach program, which gave me my first white coat and stethoscope when I was in high school. The Bridge preparatory program, which gave me a huge boost in self-confidence. The admissions committee here, which goes to great lengths to get to know the students knocking at the door. The professors, who care about us beyond just our grades.

Not everyone is as blessed as I have been. Some people have never been counseled about the power of education, the satisfaction of hard work, the thrill of giving your all. You and I can mentor them, as so many have mentored me. Whatever your race, whatever your situation, you can play a role.

The point is not to turn every child into a physician. The point is to let every child know, right from the start, that with passion and hard work, anything is possible. Our job is to plant seeds of opportunity where no one has planted them before.

To black men who might be reluctant to consider the field of medicine: We need you. Your patients need you. If I can do this, so can you.

Contact Brett Thomas at bathomas@med.fsu.edu. For more information on outreach programs, visit: <http://www.med.fsu.edu/StudentAffairs/undergrad.asp>.

BILL LAX/FSU PHOTO LAB

Brett Thomas receiving his white coat in August 2010.

