

## Awarding 'a spirit of liberation'

Rural, single-parent family. Few resources. No reliable transportation. Little access to health care, which aggravated his brother's sickle cell anemia. It sounds like a textbook description of the patients our students are trained to serve. Instead, it's a description of one of our students – one who has excelled despite a challenging childhood and has just received a prestigious national award.

Brett Thomas is one of only 13 medical students in the country to receive a Minority Scholars Award from the American Medical Association Foundation. That means he will receive a \$10,000 scholarship to help him complete medical training and eventually contribute to improving minority health.

"Brett graduated from the University of Florida and during his premedical years was on a research team investigating ways to improve cultural sensitivity in health care," said Robert Watson, M.D., executive

associate dean for administrative affairs, as well as Thomas' advisor. "He entered the Bridge Program, where he performed spectacularly and has continued his stellar academic performance.

"Brett was elected president of the Class of 2014 and re-elected this year. Brett also serves as the service coordinator of the Christian Medical Association. He is unassuming and humble, always seeming surprised and blessed when an accolade comes his way. He will become a physician of the highest type."

The award is part of the AMA Foundation's effort to help ease medical students' debt load, which now totals about \$158,000 per graduate. That kind of debt can pressure new physicians into pursuing lucrative specialties and discourage them from practicing primary care or from practicing in underserved areas. Thomas said this award would be an enormous help.

"Because I didn't qualify for national and regional awards for medical students during my Bridge year," he said, "I was on the path to accrue more graduate debt

compared to most of my colleagues. The support from the AMA, the College of Medicine and other scholarship resources has provided a spirit of liberation to pursue a specialty irrespective of the salary."

Thomas also drew from his background in completing a summer research project. His article about the findings was published in the July 2011 issue of *Academic Medicine*. "Contributors of Black Men's Success in Admission to and Graduation from Medical School" explores the balance among educational experiences, exposure to medicine, psychosocial-cultural experiences, and personal attributes and individual perceptions. Find the article at: [journals.lww.com/academicmedicine](http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine).



Brett Thomas