



DOCTOR DOCTOR

BY GAYLE GUYNUP
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK SICKLES

When you first arrive at the Florida State University College of Medicine in Sarasota, your first thought may well be, 'Am I at the right place?'

Indeed, the historic Weissgerber home, owned and leased to the college by Mark Famiglio, with its distinctive pink, ivy-covered façade, looks more like a ladies boutique than a college of medicine.

But once you walk inside, you know you are at the right place.

Dean of the college is Dr. Bruce Berg, who worked as an intensive care and pulmonary care physician at both Sarasota Memorial Hospital and Doctors Hospital, and was head of a large independent practice. I sat down with Dr. Berg and third-year student Nicole Brunner, to see exactly what is going on behind those ivy-covered walls.

For Dr. Berg, the move to academia was spurred by his interest in electronic information systems. "Not because I am some sort of Alpha geek," he said, but because at 3 a.m. in the ICU he became frustrated when records he needed would not be accessible.

"One thing led to another, and since no one else was willing to do it, I became the physician liaison for that. In 1995, we became a beta site, creating electronic medical records for the entire hospital

(Sarasota Memorial), not just the ICU."

It was groundbreaking work, work he calls "an outrageous challenge and a wonderful experience." After returning to school for his MBA, he returned to Sarasota Memorial to become its chief medical information officer and patient safety officer. Due to the heavy workload, he had to leave his private practice behind.

"In 2004, they decided they would be setting up a campus for the FSU College of Medicine and it sounded fascinating. I was fortunate enough to be selected," he said. "It appealed to me because it hadn't been done and, just like with the electronic medical records, I was being told it couldn't be done."

The program created at Florida State University is indeed one-of-a-kind, said Berg. "One of its most unique features is that the student spends the first two years in Tallahassee (hitting the books), and then is assigned to one of the school's regional campuses (there are six large ones and several smaller offshoots located throughout Florida). "It is there that they receive one-on-one training from certified physicians.

Of the 120 students in each FSU medical class, 20 are assigned to each of the six campuses, which is why that little pink house works so well as a college of medicine. Basically, it is home to only 40 students at any one time, 20 third-year students (who spend about 1/2 day each week at the college) and 20 fourth-year students.

One of Berg's first jobs was to assemble the physicians and hospitals that would serve as a surrogate faculty. "We currently have more than 330 doctors involved in our program, six hospitals and we cover about three counties," Berg said.

The college covers six major specialties, including many sub-specialties. Those include family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, surgery and psychiatry and in their fourth year, three more required rotations: geriatrics, emergency medicine and advanced internal or family medicine.

Each student goes through each rotation. "For example," said Berg, "the first day in the surgical rotation, the student scrubs in and they assist the surgeon. There is no other medical school that provides that opportunity for third-year students."

To help coordinate the many details, there are eight clerkship directors (who are also practicing physicians), who lead the various clinical sections, or specialties.

When she arrived at the college for her third year, Nicole Brunner thought she knew what she wanted to do. "I think I still know," she said. "But a lot of students change their minds after they go through their rotations. We all have a vision of what we think our life is going to be like, but a lot of us change our minds. I thought I wanted to go into pediatrics, and halfway through my rotations, I still do," she added.

Berg believes much of the program's success

can be traced to its mission: to create excellent physicians for the underserved and the elderly, with an emphasis on primary care.

“From our campus alone, we have graduated 149 MDs, and have another 40 in line,” he said, adding that those students have moved on to a variety of excellent residency programs.

The return on investment comes when those students eventually return to the community where they studied in order to set up their practice.

“Medicine is a calling. You don’t just do this because you want a job,” Berg said. “The challenge is that there is a limited amount of time to get a massive amount of information through them. It’s overwhelmingly big. Then there is the maturation process involved – and there is no shortcut for that. We’re talking about leadership and social skills, as well as having the intellectual capacity and the intestinal fortitude to help ailing people. They have to learn what to say, when to say it and how to say it and that takes training, practice and personal maturation.”

Brunner spent the first eight years of her life in Belgium and the next eight in Switzerland, before moving to Miami when she was 16 where she finished high school. She then went to the University of Florida for her under-grad work as a health science major. As soon as she started researching medical schools she came across the FSU program. “I thought this was a program that I could really love and do well in,” she said. “It was the mission that made me think that. I liked the fact that it focused on patient care, and helping people who might not have the means to help themselves. As soon as I came in for my interview I knew. It felt like a family.”

Brunner says the easiest part of the program for her was learning to interact with the patients, something that comes naturally to the outgoing young woman. “The hardest thing,” she added, “was time management. We work the same hours the doctors do, but we also have to read up on the cases and study for exams. Your life isn’t your life anymore,” she said.

Asked if she would consider coming back to Sarasota to set up practice after her residency, Brunner said, “I definitely will consider coming back here to work. The medical community here is wonderful. Every physician I’ve worked with has been just incredible – smart, focused and willing to teach.”

One of the main challenges in teaching medicine today, said Berg, is that the medical profession is in the midst of a groundswell of changes. “Medicine is the last of the major industries (17-18 percent of the gross domestic product) to go from a cottage industry to being industrialized and commoditized. It’s a huge transition, like when we went from the horse and buggy to cars.

“Ultimately, the bulk of the care in this country is going to be performed by some pretty massive organizations. There is a tremendous integration of care going on right now, that requires incredible electronic systems and people who know how to use it,” Berg said. “What that means for these students is that there are tremendous opportunities ahead. What we teach here is patient care, but the reality is that there are a huge number of as yet unborn opportunities that will be open to them in the years ahead.”

The challenges in medical school remain high, though, such as graduating with, on average, between \$150,000 and \$200,000 in debt, debt which most will not be able to begin paying back until they are in their early 30s, following three to 10 years in residency.



Campus dean, Dr. Bruce Berg.



“It’s sobering,” said Berg. “You really have to learn who you are, and learn where you fit in the medical world. With 20 students at a time, we are flexible enough to help them find those answers,” he said.

That groundswell of change will reach into the FSU College of Medicine, as well. “We, as FSU, soon will be helping to run a new residency program at Sarasota Memorial,” Berg said. “Tallahassee will be the designated institutional authority that will be running the program through Sarasota Memorial Hospital.” The school will act as the feeder system for the residency program, which should see its first class in 2017.

“It is a fascinating opportunity,” Berg said. “I’m sure that as part of the program the hospital will be providing additional services to the underserved in the community, as that is part of residency training,” he added.

Other changes in the school’s future include getting more involved in community medicine. Currently students take a community medicine course, whereby each student spends three weeks with one community organization that is involved in some aspect of health care.

“A tremendous amount of health care is provided outside the hospitals, doctor’s offices and emergency care facilities,” explained Berg. “Nicole has spent three weeks with Selah Freedom (which deals with human trafficking), for example. At the end of the three weeks, each student will give a presentation to their fellow students on where they have been and what they have learned.

“It was so wonderful,” said Nicole. “I met some of the girls at the Selah Freedom home. They were very open and honest with me,” she added. “There are great lessons to be learned from all of these organizations,” she said.

Other areas that will be a focus of the program in coming years include a greater focus on research, greater involvement in residency programs and the addition of PAs (physician assistants) to the student body.

One thing that won’t change is the fierce competition to succeed in medical school. “It’s a privilege to do this work,” Berg said. “You learn some of the secrets of the universe when you’re involved in medicine. You have a wonderful opportunity to be a guest in someone’s life. Certainly someone like Nicole, with her many cultural experiences and great bedside manner, is going to endear herself to people from the very beginning, which makes taking care of them easier and more effective. If patients are willing to talk to you, and you are willing to listen, that’s more than half the battle,” he said.

Asked what qualities have served her best at FSU, Nicole said, “patience – patience and empathy.” Berg smiled. “We are moving toward a medical field that requires a broad depth of knowledge and skills,” he said. “Fortitude, patience, perseverance and self-discovery. Those are all part of our program here.”

So what will all of these coming changes mean for the beautiful pink house with the ivy covered walls?

“Time will tell,” said Berg. The home first came to the college through local philanthropist Mark Famiglio, who had it moved from near the Ritz-Carlton to its current location on Cocoanut. “At first, his intention was to use the home for personal reasons, but right at that time we happened to come along and he was willing to lease it to us. It’s really a two-story home, but we added a third story, where we have our classroom. Students use the space for classes, for meetings, for test-taking, video-conferencing, and, of course, for study. “It’s amazingly effective,” Berg said. With the coming addition of the PA students, space may become an issue, though at this point no changes are planned.

For now, at least, that pretty pink house is working just fine.



Third-year medical student Nicole Brunner.