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### **EAST GADSDEN GRAD TAKES HER PLACE AT FSU COLLEGE OF MEDICINE**

A total of 120 new medical students formally received their white coats Aug. 20 at Florida State University – and one of them was from Gadsden County.

She's the same one who was valedictorian of East Gadsden High's Class of 2005. The one who got her bachelor's from FSU in just three years. The one who taught a year of chemistry at East Gadsden, who still drives over from Tallahassee on Sundays to sing in the choir of her uncle's Bethlehem Church of God in Christ.

She's Miranda Mack, 23. Remember that name. She has overcome early hardships to become a bright new role model for the young people of Gadsden.

She says she'd been dreaming of that white coat since age 4.

"It was just a good moment overall, the moment when I realized I've actually made it," Mack said after the College of Medicine ceremony. "I realized: I'm really here!"

Years of hard work await her. She'll have four years of medical school, then at least three years of medical residency training before she can go into practice. But no one doubts that she'll succeed.

"She has a huge heart, she is blessed with the talent to get along with everyone, and she has the intellectual capacity to succeed in the most demanding academic program," said Assistant Dean Helen Livingston. "Miranda embodies the qualities of the students we want at the College of Medicine. Her life has been devoted to serving others."

She'll be the first physician in her family, but many of her relatives have been involved in health care. Her brother, Gabriel, is in his last year of pharmacy school at Florida A&M. Her grandfather, Clarence Robinson, was a medic in the Army and a supervisor at Florida State Hospital. Her grandmother, Doris Robinson, was a nursing assistant. One aunt works in medical records. Another is a registered nurse. And her mother, Lucinda Mack, is a licensed practical nurse.

Her mother gets the credit for the education that is opening doors.

"She's one of the smartest people I've ever met in my life," Miranda said. "She's a musician, she's a writer, she does paintings, but she's pretty much poured her whole life into my brother and me. She worked two and three jobs to support us. We were reading by the time we were 2 or 3 years old."

Mack's parents divorced when she was about 2, and her father moved to Georgia, so she lived primarily with her mother in the Lake Talquin area south of Quincy. When she stayed with her father, she says, he sometimes was abusive. Before he died last year, she and her father made peace with each other, and he became an encourager for her. In a sense, their rocky relationship helped lead her to where she is now – thanks to the way a doctor responded when she was only 4.

“One of the people that I really trusted was my pediatrician, Dr. Pat Woodard,” she said. “I would talk to him about what was going on. He was really receptive, really kind. I thought, ‘I want to be what he is to other people.’”

She's already accustomed to helping people, trying to make things better. In high school, she volunteered at Magnolia House retirement home. At church, she has filled many roles. And when she saw a problem in middle or high school, she'd go straight to the School Board and say, “This needs to change.”

“They laughed about it because I was so young,” she said, “but I really pushed for a lot of things to happen.”

Her thoughts about becoming a doctor got a big boost in summer 2004, when she participated in a three-week Rural Introduction to Premedical Education session at the College of Medicine.

“They exhausted us!” she said with a laugh. “That's when I really started to get interested in being here for undergraduate years. By the time senior year came, the only place I applied to was Florida State.”

She earned her bachelor's degree in exercise science in 2008 and spent the next year as an honors instructor of chemistry and physical science at East Gadsden. She enjoyed teaching more than she had expected, but after much soul-searching she decided to pursue medicine. At the College of Medicine in summer 2009 she entered the Bridge Program, an intensive one-year master's program that prepares nontraditional students for medical school. Completing that program this past May, she's now a first-year medical student.

Her mission is identical to that of the College of Medicine: to serve the underserved. And one of the college's most influential administrators is Dr. Alma Littles, a Quincy native who used to practice family medicine here.

“Watching Miranda receive her white coat was a moment of pride for me, as well as her family members (my former patients) who were in attendance,” said Littles, senior associate dean for medical education and academic affairs. “When I left private practice to become a medical educator, my motivation was to try to encourage others to pursue careers in medicine and focus on populations in underserved and rural areas.”

“I am extremely proud of all of our students, and having a student from Gadsden County join the medical school is particularly rewarding. Miranda is bright, quiet and unassuming, and I’m confident she will become an excellent physician.”

Mack thinks she wants to return to practice in Gadsden, but it’s hard to say: First-year students have so much to discover. So she’s developing the virtue of patience.

In the meantime, she has support from her family, her fellow students, the faculty and staff, and her church. And she is determined to help change the academic image of this county.

When people hear “Gadsden County,” she said, “they think poverty, they think lack of education, they think that ‘the people there don’t care about their futures.’ Hopefully I’ll be one of those people who can blaze a trail and let people know that good things do come out of Gadsden County.”