

First Hometown Scholar Endorsed by The Wright Center for Community Health, Grace McGrath, to Attend Medical School at A.T. Still University School of Osteopathic Medicine in Arizona

In late June, Grace McGrath was in Northern California, getting ready to attend a practice round of the U.S. Open at Pebble Beach, when she got a most unexpected phone call. The voice on the other end had some pretty big news to share – McGrath’s longtime dream of attending medical school was about to become a reality. “It was a great way to end the week,” said McGrath, who was, at the time, serving as a public health coordinator at The Wright Center for Community Health and on the wait-list for possible acceptance into medical school.

A few short weeks later, the 25-year-old Dunmore resident embarked on a cross-country trip with her dad to Mesa, AZ and began her first year of medical school at A.T. Still University School of Osteopathic Medicine in Arizona (ATSU-SOMA), a partner of The Wright Center for Community Health.

McGrath is the first Scranton-area resident and Wright Center for Community Health endorsed candidate to be accepted into ATSU-SOMA’s Hometown Scholars program, which targets future physicians looking to make an impact in a community health setting.

“The idea is to identify people committed to practicing in underserved communities, specifically in their hometown areas,” said McGrath, one of 10 first-year medical students accepted into the program this year. Along with doing all the usual things one has to do to apply to medical school, a Hometown Scholar must spend time in a community health center and be recommended by a community health center leader. In McGrath’s case, her endorsement came from Dr. Linda Thomas-Hemak, Chief Executive Officer of The Wright Center for Community Health.

McGrath’s training at ATSU-SOMA will be unique from other medical schools in that she will have the opportunity to return to Scranton for her second year. She will train in the classroom while also going into The Wright Center for Community Health’s clinical settings at least once a week. “Usually, you don’t get to do that until the third year,” she said. She’ll continue these rotations into her third and fourth years, while also layering in rotational experiences in area hospitals.

The oldest of five children in a tight-knit Dunmore family, McGrath had a sense early on that her path might one day lead to a career in medicine. Beyond being good at science, she believed it was inherently in her nature to want to help people. “I just like the idea of being the person in the room who during an emergency just knows what to do and what to say. Someone who can be that voice of reason when people really need it most,” she said. “And I love working as part of a team.”

Formative experiences in her young life also played a significant role.

For instance, when her uncle, local attorney Harry McGrath, passed away during her senior year of college, a close family friend, Scranton-area plastic surgeon Dr. Eric Blomain, talked to her about it in such a compassionate manner that she couldn’t help but feel comforted.

Sometime later, McGrath got sick and was hospitalized for two weeks. While there, a resident physician she met encouraged her to go to medical school.

As it happens, the resident's name was also Grace.

"It was such a human thing. It was more than just a doctor coming in and giving you an update on your condition. She cared," McGrath said. "It shows you can have that impact on people when they need it the most."

Upon graduating from Temple University with a degree in kinesiology in 2016, McGrath sought out Dr. Thomas-Hemak for advice on her next move. "I was thinking of getting my master's degree at the time," McGrath said. "Dr. Thomas said, 'Why don't you come work here for a year to get a better understanding of medicine and community health centers. You can work with the residents and with me.' So I did. And I've been here ever since."

In her three years with the organization, she's grown a lot and taken on several different roles. As public health coordinator, she worked with patients served by several innovative programs, specifically the outpatient Center of Excellence (COE) for opioid use disorder, through the AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program.

Meanwhile, she also began pursuing her master's degree in healthcare systems engineering at Lehigh University, which she intends to finish someday following medical school. And, of course, she has spent a significant amount of time observing Dr. Thomas-Hemak in action, both in her capacity as an executive and as a primary care physician.

"She has graciously mentored me both professionally and personally," McGrath said. "What I've always appreciated about Dr. Thomas is the interest she has in complex family dynamics and her understanding of multi-generational families. She always asks things like, 'How's your mom doing?' If she needs to spend 40 minutes with someone, she spends 40 minutes with them. So much of that is now lost in medicine."

That philosophy has had a profound effect on McGrath, who would eventually like to work in primary care because, as she put it, "I want to know my patients; I want to have a relationship with them." And, if one day she can practice at an organization similar in scope and vision to The Wright Center for Community Health, all the better.

On Friday, July 19, McGrath received her ATSU-SOMA white coat at a formal ceremony in Mesa along with 161 of her new classmates. This rite of passage for medical students signifies their entrance into the medical profession, and, for McGrath was yet another opportunity to reflect on her unique path to become a physician.

"It was just surreal, and really, the happiest day of my life. I am just so grateful for everyone who has been behind me, constantly encouraging me to pursue my dream."

"It's kind of weird in a way that I'll be 32 when I have a real job again," McGrath said with a laugh. "For me, though, sometimes you have to take risks. I want to wake up at age 45 having picked the job I always wanted. I keep telling myself, 'Be grateful and excited.' Which I am."