



RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK
School of Arts and Sciences

ODASIS

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Thank you!

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Letter from the Director’s Desk



ODASIS has always been a family. I love walking into a study hall and seeing students working hard, eating their books, and helping one another with their studies. I’ve seen so many friendships made here at ODASIS—I’ve even seen students fall in love.

Love and dedication go hand in hand, of course, because you would not work hard at something unless you love it. That is why I’ve dedicated so much of myself to this program and the resources it supplies, and to our wonderful students. Love is also why the countless doctors and other professionals we have empowered are changing lives in clinics and hospitals around the world.

I will forever be proud of the opportunities that ODASIS and the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) provide, and those opportunities are only possible with the love that ODASIS and EOF alumni show by donating to our mission. If you have donated to ODASIS or EOF, I thank you. If you have not, I hope you will consider it.

Our students take advantage of everything we can offer them, so your donations show them that eating their books pays off. By working hard our students can visit medical schools, conduct pioneering research, and excel at the MCAT exam.

You will learn about these activities in the newsletter, and you will learn about the journeys of just a few of our trailblazing alumni. They will speak about what they are most proud of in their work, about their experience being underrepresented in medicine, and how they balance their job with family. You will see that being a professional is not always easy, but there is something that always drives them forward nonetheless: love. From spouses, friends, colleagues, patients, and the enduring impact of ODASIS and EOF.

Overseeing ODASIS is not easy, but it has always been worth it. I love caring for our ODASIS family. I would also like to thank the ODASIS staff, especially our new staff writer Mason Springer-Lipton for conducting these interviews and writing these articles. I truly cannot wait to see where our next generation of prospective professionals will go as they follow their dreams.

Dr. Kamal Khan

“I want to be your best friend.”

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON



Dr. Erica Gomez (EOF) and Dr. Jennifer Charles

When remembering the beginning of her friendship with Jennifer, Dr. Erica Gomez Ratush frequently recalls a moment in a Rutgers library quiet-room. It was soon after they met at ODASIS, just before exams.

“You disrespect me!?” Jennifer snapped at a group of disruptive students with the power of a Haitian grandmother. It was nearly midnight. The students peppered apologies, scuttled away, and Jennifer slowly sat back down at the desk. Erica grinned, and Jennifer smiled slyly back. They continued studying through the night.

When Dr. Gomez met Jennifer while involved at ODASIS, she had been struggling academically and unsure of her career ambitions. “Jennifer was probably what I would consider the light at the end of the tunnel for me at the ODASIS program,” Dr. Gomez says. With Jennifer’s help and ODASIS,

Dr. Gomez is now an OBGYN with her own successful private practice called PURR Gyn & Aesthetics.

Dr. Gomez did not always expect to work in medicine. “When I got into Rutgers I was still into speech and theater,” Dr. Gomez explains. Yet the tragic passing of her sister due to childbirth complications was a landmark moment in Dr. Gomez’s young life. As her family mourned this unexpected loss, Dr. Gomez searched for answers. “I wondered if it was a language barrier thing,” Dr. Gomez recalls. “I wondered if she wasn’t following up with her prenatal care.” It planted a seed in her mind about wanting to care for women’s health more inclusively.

After a few semesters of declining grades, Dr. Gomez’s Equal Opportunity Fund (EOF) advisors pointed her towards ODASIS for help. She began by doing work-study, and the ODASIS community quickly embraced her. Within that family she found lifelong friends and established a foundational support system to promote her success. She also took classes, attended study sessions, and tutored. This was where Dr. Gomez met Jennifer. “She was this sassy black Haitian girl who had a GPA of like 107.” Dr. Gomez chuckles. “I was like ‘I want to be your best friend.’” They did, in fact, quickly becoming friends--but Dr. Gomez could not have predicted how impactful their connection would become.

Dr. Gomez’ grades now took an upswing, her success fueled by the unending encouragement of her ODASIS friends. She became motivated and self-confident, even integrating her love of performing arts into a medical setting. “It’s presenting to who you’re attending to. It’s being able to spit off someone’s entire soap notes. This is all performance.” And Dr. Gomez’ practice, PURR OBGYN, is devoted to giving patients this kind of personalized and experiential care. “I know all my patients, and I love them. I know what music they like, whether it’s bossa nova or Erykah Badu.” Dr. Gomez builds rapport and eases anxiety, which in turn allows patients to feel comfortable explaining

their problems and voicing concerns.

Located directly beneath her home in a beautifully renovated basement, Dr. Gomez’ OBGYN office appears more like a cozy getaway than a medical office. There are heated marble floors, warm lighting, and an array of soaps and cleansers for patients to get ready for the appointment. Dr. Gomez conducts—among other things—hormone replacement therapy, laser hair removal, and Botox injections.

Working from a home office enables Dr. Gomez’ to balance her family life. “If I see six patients a week, that’s a decent week.” She explains. “But I also pick and drop off my kids and I spend time with them. I get to raise my children without the stress of the hospital.” She even has the room to schedule weekly therapy, life coach, and personal trainer appointments, while also allocating time for her husband and kids. “I can’t lie, my life is pretty balanced right now.” Her self-care and attention to family reflects her ability to be thoughtful to all her patients and their unique challenges.

Dr. Khan: My Stepdad

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON



Dr. Erica Concepcion and family

When Dr. Erika Concepcion attended the Middlesex County Cancer Walk with her mother and Dr. Kamal Khan, she didn’t expect them to hit it off. And she certainly didn’t expect that Dr. Khan would become

And, of course, Dr. Gomez has a strong network of friends, many of which she met through ODASIS. One of her most important friends is Jennifer. Both, as mothers, have raised their children alongside each other, supporting one other in their careers and in their personal lives. They’re as close as they were in their undergrad days at ODASIS. Jennifer would undoubtedly shut down those noisy students in the library again if it came down to it.

“ODASIS built a community for us,” Dr. Gomez reflects. “To get together, rip apart exams, learn from people that look like us, that are way smarter than us.” She laughs, thinking about her best friend. “I built that network through ODASIS.”

That network, that family, inspired her confidence during her undergrad and has remained foundational to Dr. Gomez’ life and work. The warm comfort of her office echoes the same hospitality she felt and fostered all those years ago at Rutgers, welcomed and encouraged to succeed.

her stepfather. “So yep,” Dr. Concepcion laughs. “Now he’s the grandpa to my two little kids, my niece, and my nephew.”

Currently a psychiatrist and Medical Director of Outpatient Behavioral Health Services at Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch, New Jersey, Dr. Concepcion was oblivious to ODASIS before attending Rutgers. She had only become interested in providing interpersonal medical care near the end of her high school education, and so came to college relatively directionless. It was only when Dr. Concepcion’s dormmate recommended the program that she paid Dr. Khan a visit. He immediately took her under his wing, advising her on classes and her path towards medical school. “I was like ‘Great! This guy seems like he knows what he’s doing.’”

At ODASIS she took courses, tutored other students, and was employed at work-study. However, Dr. Concepcion’s most impactful moments with ODASIS came from the MCAT preparation course that culminated in the week-long intensive “Club Arc.” “It was a week of really grueling work to get as much info as you could.” Dr. Concepcion recalls. “People were there early and late every night. And every day we’d have a family meal. There were bagels in the morning,

and rice and chicken at night.” The experience built unbreakable bonds between the students, toiling together for a similar vision--motivating one another, laughing together, and succeeding. “It’s like a bootcamp with a warm hug.”

So, when Dr. Khan surprisingly became Dr. Concepcion’s stepfather, it was actually quite a smooth transition. “I mean, I felt like ODASIS was my family from the moment I stepped foot in the door,” she said. “Dr. Khan was so much a part of my life for four years. And now we’re having dinner together and now he’s my stepdad!” The ease of this change is a testament to the strength of the ODASIS community--of the trust and empathy everyone shares with each other.

Throughout medical school, and during her work today as a psychiatrist and medical director, Dr. Concepcion holds many of her ODASIS lessons with her. Paramount among them is discipline. During her MCAT prep course, “if Dr. Khan did a roll call and not everyone was there, he would call the person on speakerphone in the classroom.” Excuses weren’t an option: either you showed you cared, or you didn’t. “I appreciate that today because I still hold myself to that standard every time I go to work.”

Dr. Concepcion employs this discipline in the way she interacts with patients. She refers to it as the “art” of communication. “It’s being able to, in a tactful and deliberate but also caring way, tell someone that not taking their antipsychotic is negatively impacting their life.” Her practice also emphasizes making the patients feel comfortable explaining anything to her, allowing them to interrupt her and speak conversationally.

Furthermore, ODASIS fostered her collaborative skills while working with peers, tutoring, and making professional connections. These experiences are directly applicable at the Monmouth Medical Center, as it is a fantastic place for serving patients in a streamlined and integrated way. Within the same building there are physicians as well as a pharmacist—and each patient that walks in has their vitals taken, providing Dr. Concepcion with valuable information on their state before an appointment. “We had this one patient recently who came in with low blood pressure and almost fainted while getting their vitals taken.” Dr. Concepcion recalled. “So, we sent them over to the physician and eventually they had to go to the ER.” Instances like this show the power of integrated healthcare, and why close collaboration between skilled medical professionals is effective. As Medical Director of Outpatient Behavioral Health Services, Dr.

Concepcion coordinates this thriving medical network in Long Branch and in another location in Neptune, New Jersey.

Additionally, many of the patients treated in this clinic are economically and socially underserved, and Dr. Concepcion works to close their financial gaps so that everyone can be cared for sufficiently. For instance, she frequently helps patients in applying for medication assistance to get around exorbitant copays. The office itself reflects this community diversity, full of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Not only does this create a better working environment, but it also builds stronger connections between patients and providers, generating better health outcomes. “It’s simple,” Dr. Concepcion explains about her workplace, “But we have this potluck where people bring their traditional foods, and it’s great! I get to try someone’s grandma’s recipe.” Just like in the ODASIS “Club Arc,” food brings Dr. Concepcion and her colleagues together.

But balancing work and family presents other unique challenges. “I’m still trying to figure that all out,” Dr. Concepcion admits. A mother of two children, she spends her time outside of the clinic at home, playing with them and being present. She must walk the dog, prepare her kids for school, and do all the number of seemingly menial tasks that quickly add up. It is a labor of love, as family always is.

And family extends beyond the home and back to the organization that so influenced her: ODASIS. “I like the opportunity to Facetime to reconnect and see where everyone is,” she said about her ODASIS friends. Additionally, she is heavily involved with the undergraduate functioning of ODASIS. “It was a family, and there was this expectation that family helps family.” She explains. “I want to be a part of that.” Dr. Concepcion attends countless ODASIS events and donates to the program for books and other materials. “Rutgers University is an amazing institution for higher learning. But it’s also huge, and at times an overwhelming place for an 18-year-old entering into the world of academia. ODASIS provides a very focused bridge.” Being able to support that bridge for the next generations is rewarding and impactful.

Dr. Concepcion additionally keeps in contact with many of her friends from those college years, those same students she dined with and poured over textbooks with during the MCAT bootcamp. It is a family connected through passion, discipline, and respect. And, in the case of Dr. Khan, it is a family connected through marriage, too.

ODASIS in Congress

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON



Dr. Erica Scavella

In a cavernous room within the United States Capitol Building, Dr. Erica Scavella steps up to the podium to address the Committee on Veterans' Affairs. She is the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services in the Department of Veterans Affairs, leading a massive team of diverse and expert healthcare professionals located across the country. Raising her chin and breathing in, she is confident in her expertise thanks to years of thorough education and participation in communities like ODASIS. After all, she has already addressed Congress eight times in the last two years. She begins to speak: "Good afternoon, Chairman Tester. Thank you for the invitation to testify. Addressing the unique needs of women Veterans is crucial, especially as they are the fastest-growing group served by VHA today..."

Dr. Scavella's medical journey began in her childhood. Growing up in Chicago with various family members who were veterans and medical professionals, the pieces of her future career were already placed. But her initial scientific fascination came from more humble beginnings. "One of my best gifts that I received as a child was a science kit," Dr. Scavella remembers. "I was able to make things foam and explode. I loved the inquisitiveness." Also important was the tragic passing of Dr. Scavella's mother in a car accident. "I was 7. I wanted to know what happened to her." Excelling through a Chicago private school, Dr. Scavella soon attended Rutgers University on an academic scholarship.

At Rutgers, Dr. Scavella majored in Biological

Sciences and enjoyed each class. One day, while getting a meal at Tillet Dining Hall, a young man noticed Dr. Scavella holding an organic chemistry textbook. "He asked if I was studying for medical school, and I said yes." They began studying together, hanging out, and quickly became friends. This man would later become her husband.

During this time Dr. Scavella also joined ODASIS. "I initially didn't seek it out," Dr. Scavella said. "But several of my classmates and I were told that medicine wasn't for us and that we weren't going to make it. Having ODASIS there shunned those voices away." The program provided Dr. Scavella, her future husband, and many others with a community of underrepresented medical students. With this support network, Dr. Scavella always maintained her confidence despite these discouraging comments. "I just said to myself, 'You don't know who I am.' That's the attitude I've had for my entire life."

After Rutgers, she attended Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and then attended residency at the University of Maryland. She also married her husband, whom she followed through medical school and residency. Dr. Scavella then began her career by teaching residents at the University of Maryland. "But then I became interested in healthcare quality work," Dr. Scavella said. "I wanted to look at the risk factors of veterans and find treatments for those times in between appointments when they weren't in the office." She transitioned from academic to administrative medicine as a VA physician, a somewhat risky shift in her career. "But it was what I loved."

"We have over 9.5 million enrolled veterans of which 6 to 7 million actively use us," Dr. Scavella said about the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Healthcare. In fact, many veterans continue to mostly or exclusively use VA for their healthcare even if they choose to also see physicians outside of that system. "Because of the integrated care," She explained. "You can seamlessly see your internist, ophthalmologist, and your psychiatrist, while resting assured that each will immediately have access to your electronic health record. We're the largest integrated healthcare system in the country."

In 2010, Dr. Scavella became a Medical Investigator for the VA in their Washington, DC headquarters. This position entailed examining concerns of healthcare quality within their system,

maintaining the VA's high-quality services. "Let's imagine that you were supposed to have an operation on your leg, but it was the wrong leg," Dr. Scavella described. "It sounds crazy, but it happens!" As a Medical Investigator, and eventually as The Medical Inspector overseeing all aspects of that office, she investigated cases like this one. This position was even more fulfilling and fascinating for her, and she continued to climb the ranks in the VA. In 2022, Dr. Scavella became the Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Services in the Department of Veterans Affairs. "If you look at the published studies, we outperform the private sector on so many quality metrics," she said proudly about her work.

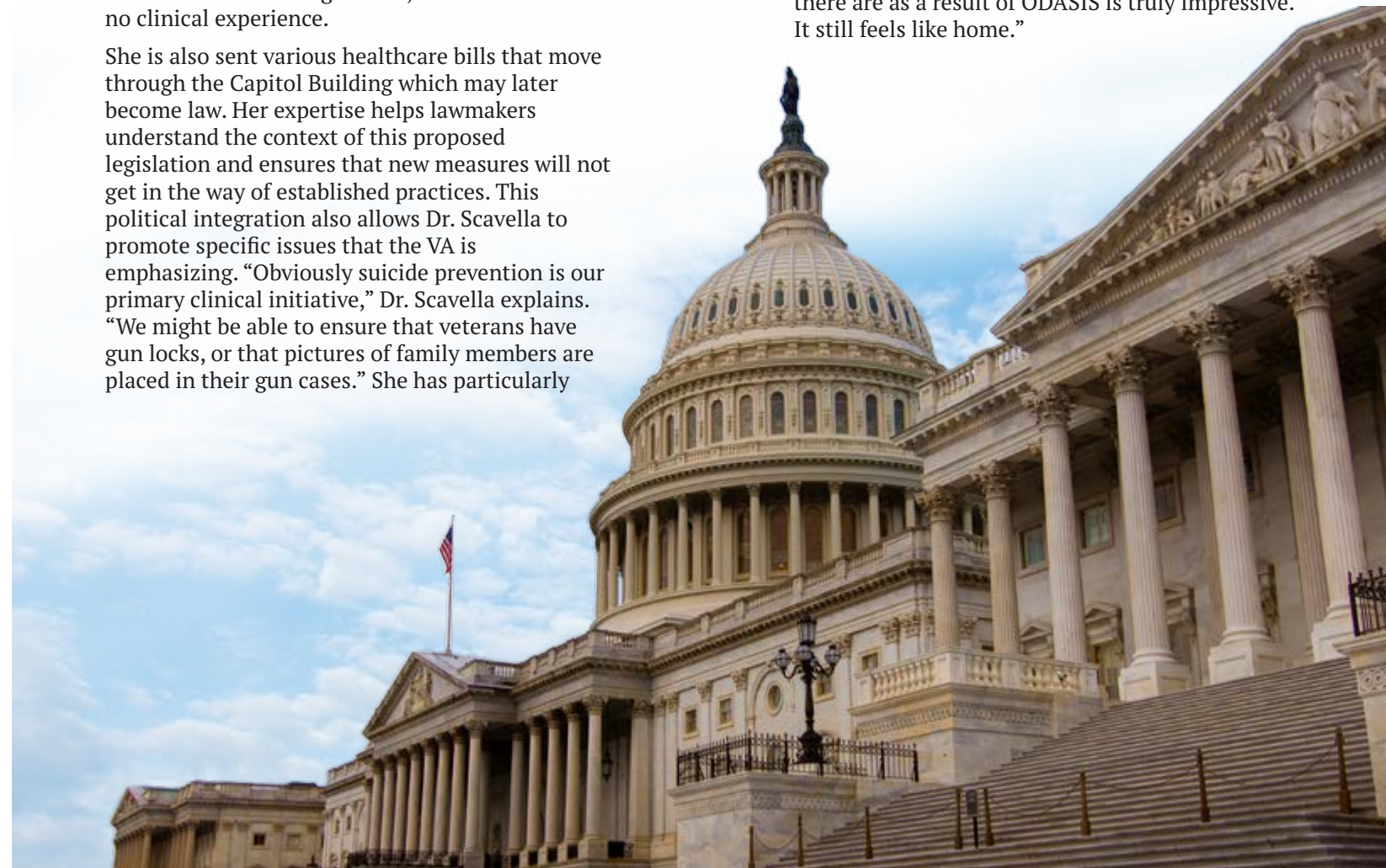
As Assistant Under Secretary, Dr. Scavella's duties graduated well beyond direct patient care and investigation. "I have a huge team of talented physicians," She explained. "And I'm responsible for all the clinical care we provide." But beyond administration, Dr. Scavella also now works directly with the federal government in Washington, DC. "I've testified before Congress many times. It usually involves members of congress asking questions about how we enacted a piece of legislation or how well we're taking care of our population of patients." This aspect of Dr. Scavella's job is particularly challenging, as it requires her to deftly articulate complex medical issues and terms to legislators, most of whom have no clinical experience.

She is also sent various healthcare bills that move through the Capitol Building which may later become law. Her expertise helps lawmakers understand the context of this proposed legislation and ensures that new measures will not get in the way of established practices. This political integration also allows Dr. Scavella to promote specific issues that the VA is emphasizing. "Obviously suicide prevention is our primary clinical initiative," Dr. Scavella explains. "We might be able to ensure that veterans have gun locks, or that pictures of family members are placed in their gun cases." She has particularly

focused on integrating women's health into the VA medical system, as the system was historically designed to care for men. "We have a rising number of young, reproductive age women who are coming in for care."

Despite her immense duties, Dr. Scavella is still able to make lots of time for her family: her husband and two sons. "We spent as much time as we could in school," Dr. Scavella said. "We were on the PTA and in the sports team parent groups. Me and my husband make it work." Her sons have since graduated college. Her oldest son graduated from Morehouse and is finishing medical school in 2026 with an M.D. and MBA. His younger brother is a Harvard graduate. And, as always, ODASIS remains a source of support. "When my oldest son was applying to medical school, we reached out to Dr. Khan to see what he thought. He was happy to help."

Indeed, Dr. Erica Scavella has truly had an impressive career. From fizzling experiments in a childhood science kit, she now walks the halls of congress promoting high-quality and inclusive healthcare around the country. ODASIS was there for her during a formative period of her life, providing community and support that empowered her to success. "It was an important foundation for me," Dr. Scavella reflects on ODASIS. "Going back now and seeing how many physicians of color there are as a result of ODASIS is truly impressive. It still feels like home."



Lobsters and Opportunity

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON



Dr. Randy Jackson (EOF)

At the 2010 ODASIS graduation ceremony, Randy Jackson grinned mischievously as Dr. Kamal Khan opened a present on the stage. Suddenly, Dr. Khan jumped back, yelping loudly. Inside the gift bag was a living lobster.

“There was this running joke that every year at the motivational workshop Dr. Khan was gonna bring lobsters,” Dr. Jackson says. “But there were never any lobsters! It was a lie.” So, he and a couple of ODASIS friends bought the lobsters themselves and executed the devious prank. “It was perfect. We had to get him back for years of emotional torture—and lying about the lobsters.”

This hilarious moment was a testament to the long and fruitful connection Dr. Jackson had with the ODASIS community. Indeed, ODASIS and the Education Opportunity Fund (EOF) program worked closely with Dr. Jackson throughout his educational experiences, providing invaluable support and mentorship. These paramount organizations empowered him to rise from hardship and become a faculty member at the University of California, San Francisco, one of the top medical schools in the country.

Growing up in a lower-income community near the city of New Brunswick, Dr. Jackson was restricted in his ability to access higher education. He was



exposed to gang violence and substance abuse, worked multiple jobs, and took on the responsibility of supporting his family while at Rutgers. Death and addiction being commonplace in his upbringing, Dr. Jackson gained exposure to many medical spaces, which slowly germinated a fascination with medicine and a desire to help others. He wanted to become a doctor, and was determined to realize his potential despite the obstacles.

Dr. Jackson learned about ODASIS during the summer EOF program leading into his freshman year at Rutgers. When Dr. Jackson visited Beck Hall during his first week of classes, Dr. Khan sat him down and said, “Take this class, and take that class. Just do it.” As the only campus organization helping underrepresented students along the pre-med track, ODASIS quickly became an vital resource for the rest of Dr. Jackson’s undergraduate journey. He took courses, attended support programs, and honed his academic skills.

When Dr. Jackson initially struggled to balance work and classes, ODASIS was there to help. Dr. Jackson began to tutor multiple subjects for ODASIS as a way to make extra money. “If I ever needed anything I would go to Dr. Khan: if I couldn’t afford courses or struggled with family stuff, he would say ‘go call this person.’ He was never wrong.” The only thing he was wrong about, of course, was the lobsters.

The summer after his freshman year, Dr. Jackson accompanied Dr. Khan and a group of ODASIS students on a trip to the Trenton State Legislature to advocate for more student funding for ODASIS and EOF. “The drive down he was digging into me the whole time. ‘You gotta work your butt off, this is why you have to be there for people.’ It just spoke volumes. I was like, 19.”

Dr. Khan’s tender empathy and rigorous discipline was emblematic of ODASIS as a whole. ODASIS is a family, first and foremost. It is a community that motivates and empowers, while also providing academic resources. And, indeed, while Dr. Jackson took advantage of its resources, he also formed lifelong friendships. He learned lessons of accountability, work ethic, and empathetic care—all of which he takes with him to his career every day.

He now works at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), within the department of Family and Community Medicine where he is the associate program director for their Family Medicine residency. He works primarily within the department of public health system in San Francisco, while providing care at San Francisco General Hospital, the only level one trauma center in the city. He provides full spectrum primary care for patients within one of their primary care clinics and also works within the BRIDGE clinic, where he provides care for patients with substance use disorders. He has training in addiction medicine and teaches within the UCSF Addiction Medicine Fellowship. He is also faculty within the UCSF Latinx Center of Excellence, where he helps support healthcare workforce development and is working to establish pathways programs in San Francisco that are similar to ODASIS. “No two days are the same in my job.” Dr. Jackson explains. Taking meetings, treating patients, and teaching students at various stages of their medical journeys define his workweek.

While in the clinic, Dr. Jackson always finds ways to genuinely connect and build rapport with the patients he is caring for. “In the exam room I shed the white coat and I don’t use medical jargon because it creates this disconnect.” Dr. Jackson frequently observes patients of color sigh with relief as a doctor who looks like them walks into the room. Moments like this shine a light on the importance of ODASIS, as it creates more diverse and inclusive medical spaces. In fact, studies have shown that patients of color have more positive health outcomes when being cared for by providers with similar cultural backgrounds.

Despite the massive time commitment Dr. Jackson’s career entails, he maintains a healthy balance between work and home. “I go to the gym to work out early in the morning every day,” He says, “That’s my me time.” He also limits the time he spends doing work on his phone outside of clinical hours, and he spends a lot of time at the beach with his dog. Dr. Jackson acknowledges that

physical distance from his family in New Jersey was quite challenging but leaving his home state was vital for his growth, both as a person and a clinician. The time away from home allowed him to pursue new passions and discover what truly motivates him in the world of medicine and education. Despite being so far away he manages to stay connected, “I can still help my family and be present, but I don’t need to be physically there all the time.”

One way Dr. Jackson always remains present within his family and his community is the enduring nature of his example. Despite being the first in his family to graduate from college, he has dedicated himself to making sure that he won’t be the only one. Dr. Jackson has shown his family and community that it is possible to become a doctor despite overwhelming obstacles--that everyone is the author of their own story. His inspiring journey, through ODASIS and beyond, has made foundational impacts on all that know him.

And just like Dr. Jackson can be present for his family and neighborhood from afar, he is also heavily involved in the ODASIS community. Recently, he spoke at the Fall 2024 ODASIS orientation. He also frequently donates to ODASIS and speaks with new students in the same halls where he studied in all those years before. “There’s so much untapped potential in students who get overlooked and aren’t given an opportunity.” Dr. Jackson said, reflecting on his life experiences. “There are so many students out there just waiting for an opportunity who just don’t know what is available because their parents didn’t go to college, or don’t speak English, or don’t have the resources. I don’t think there’s any better feeling than being able to give back to that.”

So, when Dr. Jackson surprised Dr. Khan with a lobster that graduation day in 2010, it was as much a prank as it was a thank-you for years of endless assistance from ODASIS. “If you give opportunities to folks who traditionally weren’t given a chance,” Dr. Jackson explains from his office in San Francisco. “They will show you what they can do.”



Setbacks and Street Medicine

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON



Dr. Edward Egan

With a backpack full of medicine, Dr. Edward Egan marched through the streets of Pittsburgh looking for those who needed help. Alongside him were a community health worker, a medical student, and Dr. Jim Withers, the founder of Operation Safety Net the Street Medicine Institute, which aims to treat people experiencing homelessness directly on the street, taking care of those alienated from the medical system. Under shadowy bridges, alongside rocky riverbanks, and cramped between alleyways, Dr. Egan bandaged wounds, dislodged foreign objects from eyes, distributed antibiotics, and provided harm reduction supplies. After years of demoralizing setbacks, he had finally made it, and he was finally able to help others in the way he always wanted. Today, Dr. Egan provides the same street medical care in his home state of New Jersey alongside community partners in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

For Dr. Egan, it was a trip to the Emergency Room as a child that sparked this burning desire to heal others. “I had broken my arm, but my Mom was working a double shift and had a big table—we needed that tip money.” His single mother struggled to keep their family afloat and worked as a waitress for much of the day; Dr. Egan sat there with an ice pack on his arm and waited for her to return. They rushed to the ED at midnight, and while waiting there Dr. Egan saw a woman who had been pushed out of a car, her face torn apart and bleeding. “I remember being terrified for that person even though I had a broken arm.” It was this same desire that led him to pursue pre-medical studies at Rutgers and eventually,

ODASIS. “I wore a white coat for my high school yearbook!” Dr. Egan laughed.

At ODASIS Dr. Egan quickly found a family, even though he stood out. “I was the minority in ODASIS. I am a tall, white, blonde-haired guy.” But he understood that his voice was not the one that needed to be heard. Without a strong sense of identity in his community or culture at home, he found one within ODASIS, trying new foods and making unbreakable bonds of friendship that have followed him all his life. “It gave me a great framework of responsibility,” Dr. Egan said about ODASIS. “They make you dress up for classes, and that really worked for me. I would get in my suit and tie while studying alone because it gave me purpose.” Along with dedication, ODASIS allowed Dr. Egan to connect with countless doctors and medical schools. “I got to see people who were actually in medicine and doing great things while I was in ODASIS. I didn’t know a single doctor growing up.”

However, even with support from ODASIS, self-doubt plagued Dr. Egan in the days before MCAT exam. “It was pure terror,” Dr. Egan recalls. In his first sitting, he took the MCAT and voided the score on the last screen of the test. He was crushed. Later, he took the test again, but extenuating family circumstances and displaced overconfidence hindered him once more. “I remember getting the result and just crying in the shower. My friends were getting into medical school, and it was just so hard. I had to do some soul searching, to figure out if I was pursuing this dream for the right reasons.” So, Dr. Egan began drifting. He worked at the desk of a spa, parked cars at the Heldrich Hotel in Downtown New Brunswick, became a carpenter’s apprentice, applied for internships, and slept in friends’ basements.

It was only when he applied to the Rutgers New Jersey Leaders of Tomorrow Presidential Internship where he became a intern for NJ State Senator Joe Vitali and NJ Assemblyman Craig Coughlini that the winds changed. Now he traveled around the state, meeting with legislators and constituents, learning about the intersection of healthcare and politics. “I did policy review and

research for healthcare legislation going through Trenton,” he explained. It was inspiring to be able to help real people through his work and medical knowledge. But Dr. Egan also came to realize how few medical professionals there were in government, despite how intertwined politics and medicine are. The government regulates healthcare, decides which communities get resources or not, and creates laws around how individuals can receive life-saving care. “When you’re in medicine you are inherently in politics. We have to advocate for the communities that we take care of,” Dr. Egan explained. But he could only do so much to help these communities from his position in the government: he needed to become a doctor.

“Hurricane Sandy had just hit,” Dr. Egan recalls. “So I could stay at home for two weeks, just studying for the MCAT.” He did page after page of practice problems, reviewing the ones he got wrong, honing in on his weaknesses and overcoming them. “I probably did 10,000 practice problems,” he said. Also instrumental in this process was the support he had from his friends, many of whom he met at ODASIS. “You have to find people who you can talk to and won’t judge you,” Dr. Egan explained. “They motivated me and helped me through that time.” More prepared than ever, Dr. Egan took the test again.

It was a snowy February day when he got the call: he had gotten into his dream school, Cooper Medical. “I just fell on the ground, made a snow angel, and started crying,” Dr. Egan remembered with a smile.

Situated in the center of Camden, Cooper Medical School allowed Dr. Egan to become heavily involved in the local community. While receiving his education, he discovered street medicine and went off to Pittsburgh with the founder of the Street Medicine Movement. Dr. Egan immediately fell in love with that unique kind of care. “I love it because it feels like medicine at its most pure,” he said. “We can deliver high-quality care outside, not in the standard doctor’s office, and be a part of our community.” He has since also done work in Camden, and even worked for a time in India. “The goal is just to open a conversation. I ask how they’re doing if they need anything, and if they don’t then it’s ok.” Eventually, Dr. Egan and his colleagues become known around the town, and people will come to them.

But street medicine also provides many challenges. “What I want for the patient might not be what they want for themselves,” Dr. Egan explained. Often people will refuse to go to hospitals because of distrust or lack of resources, so he will have to treat them there without the best equipment. Patients will also frequently have

their medicine stolen or simply lose their pills. Street medicine further involves connecting local governments, social organizations, and hospitals to provide these needy people with the medical, social, and economic help they deserve. Ultimately, it was Dr. Egan’s winding journey that provided him with the many skills needed for this unique position. He now works as an Emergency Medical Physician in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

But Dr. Egan’s personal life is also a priority. “It requires giving up certain things,” he explains about balancing work in life. Dr. Egan is married, but he and his wife have largely remained independent and passionate about their careers. However, this status quo is about to change. “We have a little boy due in December,” Dr. Egan exclaimed. Now he is preparing to be a father—going running, focusing on longevity, and creating a legacy his son can be proud of. “My father wasn’t in my life growing up, so I want to be there for my son. There’s this idea in medicine that you become all the best pieces of the doctors you meet; I’m trying to be like that as a dad.” Among these role models are friends from ODASIS, and Dr. Khan.

Walking through the city streets, greeting disenfranchised people with a smile, and giving them help if they need it, Dr. Edward Egan has truly found his calling. From that life-changing moment in the Emergency Room, he has embarked on a difficult quest to heal people where they need it most. ODASIS has followed him along this journey, affording him invaluable lessons and unbreakable friendships. “You need to go back to your community to care for them,” Dr. Egan said. “ODASIS really established that for me.”

Dr. Egan in the field



The Role of an ODASIS Developmental Specialist

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON



Karolline Costa-Chen

At the ODASIS graduation ceremony, students clad in their red robes and ribbons run to Karolline Costa-Chen with tears in their eyes. They thank her profusely, for the gentle support and fiery encouragement that helped them through some of their toughest academic moments. Even alumni come back to her, expressing gratitude even as they brave through medical schools across the country. “Seeing them thank you specifically as they take their next steps is amazing,” said Mrs. Costa-Chen. As the Developmental Specialist for Biology and Math at ODASIS, Mrs. Costa-Chen has touched countless lives in the program, and continues to assist students every day.

Majoring in Political Science and History, it was not obvious that Mrs. Costa-Chen would find herself working at ODASIS. But she did go to Rutgers—both in her undergraduate and graduate careers. “I like to tell my students that I bleed scarlet,” Mrs. Costa-Chen said. She was also immensely passionate about teaching, and got her Masters at the School of Education. It was after graduating, while working at a medical company to

coordinate hospital in-services, that Mrs. Costa-Chen first encountered the medical world. “I ended up really liking it,” she explained. “And while speaking with younger people I heard lots of stories about their educational experiences.” Her trajectory shifted once again to Rutgers, and she took a job at ODASIS.

As the Developmental Specialist for Biology and Math, Mrs. Costa-Chen’s work is as multifaceted as it is crucial. “Rutgers is huge, especially during your freshman year,” Mrs. Costa-Chen said, “You’re essentially an RUID unless you go to office hours and make yourself known.” What ODASIS and her office specifically helps students with is creating both a plan and a community. While lectures at Rutgers can sometimes hold hundreds of students, the Student Instructional Sessions that Mrs. Costa-Chen organizes are small and more interactive. A portion of her job consists of interviewing Supplemental Instructors for this work, who come from all over Rutgers. “There are people from pharmacy, engineering, and computer science,” Mrs. Costa-Chen explained. Currently, there are over 35 students teaching under her as Student Instructors.

But the most important aspect of her work is advising students. “In my sessions we talk about self-evaluating,” Mrs. Costa-Chen described. “Most students are their biggest critics and not their biggest fans, but in order to be successful you have to be both.” She emphasizes self-improvement, that one must always evaluate their losses and celebrate their successes. Because ODASIS has such a good relationship with the Rutgers Biology Department, especially with many professors being ODASIS alums, personalized plans can also be created for each student. “I sit down with students and make four-year plans with them, helping them realize that even though pre-med is a credit-intensive path, they can do it.” She can give them extra resources like textbooks and provide them with valuable information on applying to medical school or other programs.

As ODASIS consists of many underrepresented people and integrates disadvantaged students from programs like the Educational Opportunity

Fund, most come to Mrs. Costa-Chen with a career goal in mind. She can focus that vision, provide a path and community to encourage them even while also accommodating the extra work and jobs these students often have. “Meeting them where they are is very important,” said Mrs. Costa-Chen. When students arrive without a specific career goal, or feeling uninspired by their academic direction, Mrs. Costa-Chen is also there to support them. “I remind them that ODASIS is a community, and no one will take it personally if you stumble.” But she can also be stern and is not afraid to tell students what they need to do to pick themselves up, whether they listen or not. External motivation is, of course, less important than the internal motivation one has for their success: Mrs. Costa-Chen fosters both.

And while Mrs. Costa-Chen is invaluable to many students, she exists within the larger body of ODASIS, whose mission she is deeply proud of. “There is a real power to have a physician that

looks like you,” Mrs. Costa-Chen said. It helps patients feel heard and taken care of, ultimately improving their outcomes. While diversity in healthcare remains low overall, ODASIS is spearheading this cause with passion and dignity.

“I feel really good about this year’s incoming class,” Mrs. Costa-Chen beamed. “Our students always impress me. We have some who are so busy, working as EMTs or doing research across the country during the summer, while still maintaining high GPAs.” A Scarlet Knight through-and-through, Mrs. Costa-Chen inspires and empowers students as much as they do her. Without the framework of ODASIS, and without the alumni and staff that keep it running, diversity in medicine would not be the same. Every prideful smile at each ODASIS graduation ceremony owes itself to the work of dedicated people just like Karolline Costa-Chen.

Eating your books pays off!

TRIPS TAKEN BY STUDENTS TO MEDICAL SCHOOLS

Rutgers New Jersey Medical School



Sidney Kimmel Medical College Thomas Jefferson University



New York College of Podiatric Medicine



Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania



Summer Research

WRITTEN BY PAIGE YOUNG



Paige Young

This summer I had the amazing opportunity to participate in the Bridging the Gaps Program at the Keck School of Medicine. The Bridging the Gaps program focuses on increasing diversity in STEM fields by providing underrepresented students with the opportunity to gain exposure in research and the medical field. Over the length of the program, I worked with Dr. Tyler Mason and his graduate student Jeremy Morales in the REACH lab, examining the relationship between the cognitive and behavioral symptoms of pathological eating behaviors and their determinants. My research project focused on examining the associations between loneliness

and eating disorder symptoms in adolescents. I assessed each participant’s subjective feelings of loneliness and the cognitive and behavioral eating disorder symptoms through self-report questionnaires containing questions from the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDEQ) and the UCLA Loneliness Scale, which were completed during an in-person clinic visit at the USC Neuroimaging Institute. Loneliness was found to be positively correlated with most eating disorder symptom variables except for dietary restraint and excessive exercise, which were found to be not statistically significant. These findings show that disordered eating serves as a coping mechanism for adolescence to temporarily distract themselves from the feelings of loneliness. I was able to present my findings to distinguished postdocs and professors at the BTG Closing Ceremony.

Through this opportunity, I was able to experience a new, diverse environment that is vastly different from my small hometown and learn about the different and unique issues being faced in this community. In my freetime, I was able to volunteer with the organization Good Karma and distribute food, water, and resources to the unhoused population in Los Angeles, and learn about the immoral acts being committed against this community, such as the removal of tents before big events. I also was granted the opportunity to shadow Dr. David Armstrong, a podiatric surgeon and researcher at the Keck School of Medicine, and Dr. Mariana Martinez, an emergency medicine physician, and learned about their roles in increasing patient outcomes in their fields.

Summer Research Program Participants

NERA-ARCH III (Rutgers – New Jersey Medical School)

- Emmanuella Abeni
- Dina Attia
- Victoria Beaumont
- Shelisa Cadet
- Erin Dindial
- Fernando Duran
- Juliana Lozano
- Joseph Manzano-Santana
- Karen Melendez-Alas
- Nia Melvin

- Onyeka Okoye
Henry Souto
Daisy Torres
Isabella Vera
Tamara Yunga-Pintado

Cancer Institute of New Jersey – RUYES

- Jordan Comer
Jonathn Julian
Maya Saez
Luis Sanchez-Gonzalez
Alex Velasco

Waksman Institute – Project SUPER

- Lilia Carnes
- Bridging the Gaps Summer Research Program, Keck School of Medicine of USC**
- Deborah Oladeji
Paige Young

GRANT LAB

- Adrian Ampadu

HOPE

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON



Dr. Tanya Howard-Williams

With shaking hands, Dr. Tanya Howard-Williams dialed a number on her phone. It buzzed, Dr. Kamal Khan answered, and Dr. Howard-Williams immediately squealed with excitement. She had been accepted into two great medical schools, receiving hefty financial aid packages to boot. Dr. Khan cheered loudly with her. “He celebrated like it was his own daughter getting into medical school,” Dr. Howard-Williams recalled with a smile.

This was a momentous occasion for Dr. Howard-Williams, especially because of the incredibly disadvantaged background she came from. Growing up in a dangerous and lower-income community, one of four children of a single mother, Dr. Howard-Williams rarely even entertained the idea of pursuing higher education. “It was just folks surviving the best they could.” Dr. Howard-Williams said. “I don’t think I met anyone my age going to college. Everyone went straight to work.” Her mother was immensely busy working three jobs for her children, and Dr. Howard-Williams did not want to add to her stress. So, she coasted through high school, doing just well enough. There was little hope for another life beyond that.

The tragic passing of Dr. Howard-Williams’ brother, however, was a catalyst for her to seriously rethink her life’s direction. Dr. Howard-Williams was only 15 at the time; her brother was 16. “I realized that if I didn’t leave that environment I wasn’t going to survive, or thrive.” Wracked by shock and grief, Dr. Howard-Williams was also struck by the lack of

compassion shown to her and her family by medical professionals during that traumatic time. It was this missing compassion that informed her career going forward. She became depressed, but pushed herself onward, nonetheless.

After high school, Dr. Howard-Williams joined the Navy. Then, she attended a community college, where she made friends and connections that opened her mind to future possibilities. Restricted by her upbringing and tracked education, she had never considered her professional potential. “I was invisible to them,” Dr. Howard-Williams said about her high school teachers. But now she could envision herself becoming a doctor. “It’s that old saying, ‘you don’t know what you don’t know.’”

After community college, while attending Rutgers, Dr. Howard-Williams visited the ODASIS office. It was a chance decision, and one that ended up being life-changing in its consequence. “I showed Dr. Khan my transcript and told him my story, and he was pushing me from then.” She laughed warmly. “He was calling me doctor even before I got into medical school.”

Dr. Howard-Williams participated vigorously in various ODASIS programs, honing her skills on standardized tests and visiting medical schools with her peers. The rooms were full of people just like her, underrepresented in medicine and motivated by the unending support of their new ODASIS family. “Everyone felt seen and heard by the ODASIS staff,” She remembers. The contrast with her primary education couldn’t have been greater.

One could only imagine the satisfaction and pride both Dr. Howard-Williams and Dr. Khan felt during that momentous phone call. It was a testament to Dr. Howard-Williams steadfast journey to scale the structural walls that threatened to contain her, and to ODASIS’ ability to empower her journey through camaraderie, motivation, and resources.

Dr. Howard-Williams now works in the Emergency Department at Spotsylvania Regional Medical Center in Virginia. She describes herself as “nocturnal” working from 9pm to 6am, mostly by herself. Bouncing between panicked patients, using a diverse skillset of medical knowledge, she thinks on her feet. “You have to always be ready to switch gears.” Dr. Howard-Williams said. “It’s so dynamic and it changes within seconds. It becomes chaos.”

This difficult work frequently involves hard conversations and harder choices. “Everyone’s emergency is their emergency,” Dr. Howard-Williams pithily explains. Sometimes patients arrive with gunshot wounds, other times with a high fever—scared and uncertain, each

patient demands her attention. Dr. Howard-Williams must be there for them, and their family, no matter the circumstances.

However, during the early months of the COVID-19 Pandemic, her care was spread even thinner. “People were dying every day. Dying alone—that was the hardest part.” But Dr. Howard-Williams kept going in, even as their ventilator supply grew dangerously thin and masks chafed around her ears. “There was no giving up, because people needed me.”

This discipline and dedication were ingrained in her throughout her education—both from the Navy and from ODASIS. Each experience has molded Dr. Howard-Williams into an effective and efficient medical provider in even the toughest of circumstances. “Just the regimen that ODASIS had us on, the expectation to show up and work hard. It just kind of followed and stuck.”

But the challenges of emergency medicine are also matched by its countless appeals. Indeed, while working in the emergency ward, Dr. Howard-Williams is proficient in countless areas of medicine. "When I went to medical school, I enjoyed every subject that we did. OBGYN, neuroscience, surgery—I enjoyed it all. And with emergency medicine you get a little bit of it all.”

Working night shifts also allows Dr. Howard-Williams time to spend with her family during the day. While her husband frequently stays at home to care for their children during her shifts, she always makes time to play with them and go to their events. She especially prioritizes organizing vacations, both as times to connect with her loved ones but also as a necessary reprieve from the hospital. As Dr. Howard-Williams describes about her parenting: “If they need Mommy for anything I will be there.”

Yet, despite the stress of her workplace, Dr. Howard-Williams is dedicated to delivering empathy to all her patients and their families. It was this gentle care that she and her family failed to receive as her brother passed. “You don’t talk

above them, or say there’s nothing you can do.” She explains. “Your job as a physician is to also take care of the person who may not be sick—the family.” Family and friends are given hope, and recovery for all involved becomes easier. As a result, Dr. Howard-Williams has enjoyed countless moments of pure gratitude from patients. She looks back on these moments during her darker times, and they fuel her.

Indeed, Dr. Howard-Williams' care is particularly meaningful to patients of color, who often do not see doctors that look like them. “They forget that they’re sick, because they want to tell you how proud they are of you to see you representing them.” In another example, Dr. Howard-Williams describes the different reception she received when telling an African American patient to take their blood pressure medication, as opposed to a white physician. It’s much more effective, “a totally different response.”

In this way, Dr. Howard-Williams is creating real change in underrepresented communities, breaking down those same walls that boxed her in. Her career shows every young girl who walks into her department that they can become a doctor—that they can aspire to anything they want. Dr. Howard-Williams is a great pride to her family and has even introduced her cousin to ODASIS. That cousin is now in medical school.

“If I hadn’t walked into Dr. Khan’s office that day and he had not been there, I can’t say that I would be a doctor.” Dr. Howard-Williams reflected. “ODASIS allowed me to believe in me. It pushed me. It exposed me to things that I didn’t know that I didn’t know.” She smiled. “It was hope.”

Working in one of the most intense, taxing, and diverse medical professions possible, Dr. Howard-Williams' work is harrowing and inspiring. Climbing from misfortune and into success, she empowers others along with her, braving each night at the hospital with moral clarity and iron determination. She is creating change; she is creating hope.

Two Doctors, One Family:

ODASIS and EOF in Action

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON

Running into each other on their dorm floor, Sadie Mirabal and Jose Otero quickly bonded over their love of science and membership in ODASIS. They studied together constantly, and grew closer over the years. “One thing led to another,” Dr. Otero recalled. “And we started dating.” Now, Dr. Otero and Dr. Mirabal are married, and work their own practices of anesthesia and pediatric medicine respectively. Parents of four kids, these two doctors represent the power of ODASIS to create community and to inspire academic success.

For Dr. Mirabal, her love for medicine came at a young age. “I always knew I wanted to work with children,” She explained. “And working in medicine always gave me a purpose in life. While Dr. Otero remained uncertain about his preferred medical discipline for many years, he soon discovered anesthesiology to be a perfect fit. “We deal with all aspects of medicine: urgent matters, trauma. All those things excited me.”

At ODASIS, Dr. Otero and Dr. Mirabal connected with like-minded peers striving for a career in medicine. “They basically become a family.” Dr. Otero recalled. “They call you, they text you. If you’re doing well, then they back off a little, but if not they’re there to push you and provide tutoring.” It propelled both students into success and love.

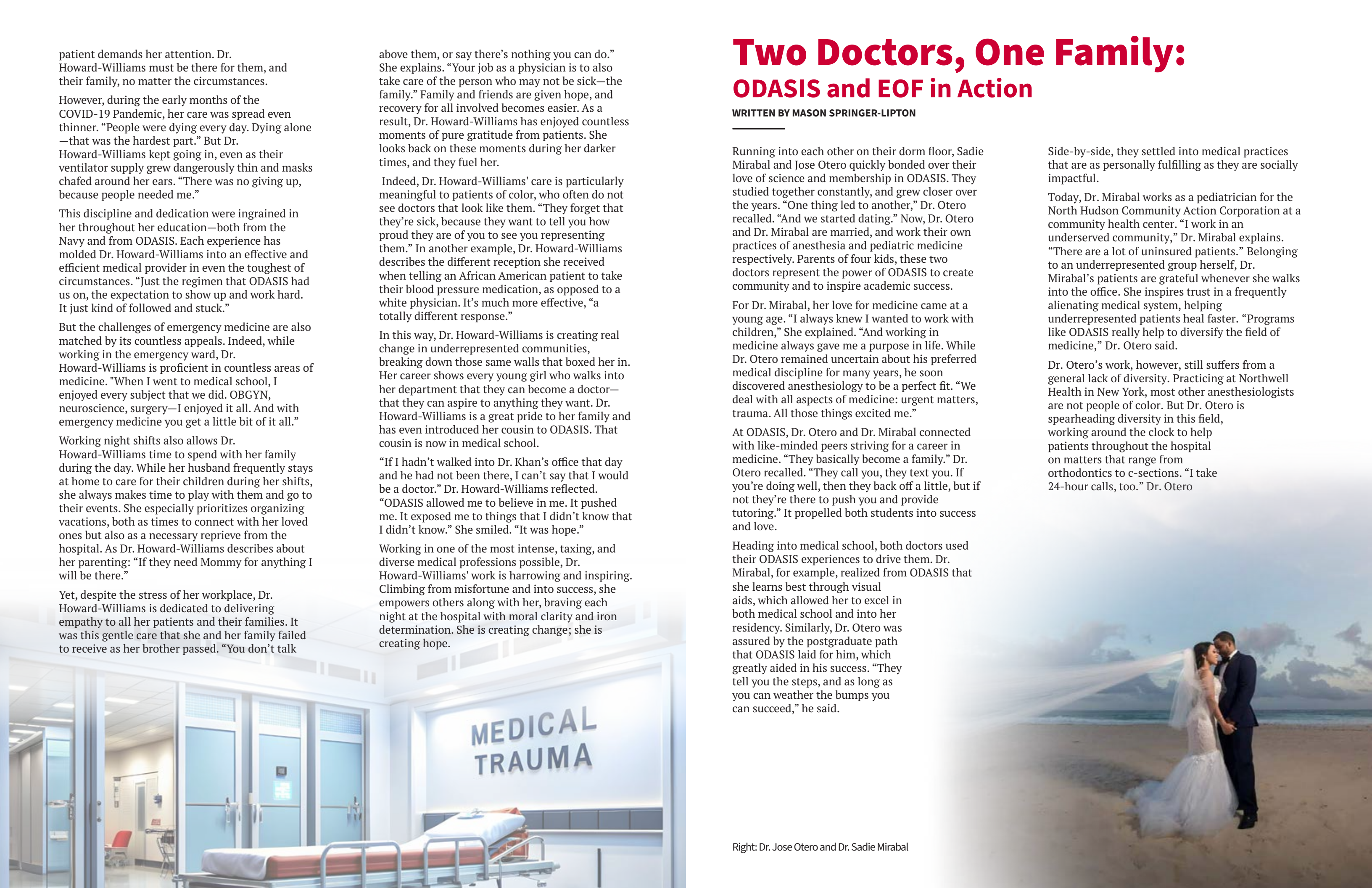
Heading into medical school, both doctors used their ODASIS experiences to drive them. Dr. Mirabal, for example, realized from ODASIS that she learns best through visual aids, which allowed her to excel in both medical school and into her residency. Similarly, Dr. Otero was assured by the postgraduate path that ODASIS laid for him, which greatly aided in his success. “They tell you the steps, and as long as you can weather the bumps you can succeed,” he said.

Side-by-side, they settled into medical practices that are as personally fulfilling as they are socially impactful.

Today, Dr. Mirabal works as a pediatrician for the North Hudson Community Action Corporation at a community health center. “I work in an underserved community,” Dr. Mirabal explains. “There are a lot of uninsured patients.” Belonging to an underrepresented group herself, Dr. Mirabal’s patients are grateful whenever she walks into the office. She inspires trust in a frequently alienating medical system, helping underrepresented patients heal faster. “Programs like ODASIS really help to diversify the field of medicine,” Dr. Otero said.

Dr. Otero’s work, however, still suffers from a general lack of diversity. Practicing at Northwell Health in New York, most other anesthesiologists are not people of color. But Dr. Otero is spearheading diversity in this field, working around the clock to help patients throughout the hospital on matters that range from orthodontics to c-sections. “I take 24-hour calls, too.” Dr. Otero

Right: Dr. Jose Otero and Dr. Sadie Mirabal



explains. Those nights when he is called in, he often operates as the only anesthesiologist in the hospital, jumping between a variety of patients and challenges. “Some nights you have a triple A,” He says, referencing a triple aortic aneurysm. “You could have a perfectly healthy kid suddenly go into bronchospasm.”

Particularly challenging was Dr. Otero’s work during the COVID-19 Pandemic. “Literally you would have people passing away every half hour at its peak.” He recalls. “You can have someone beg you ‘Please don’t let me die!’ and there’s literally just nothing you can do.” While Dr. Otero tries to work in a controlled environment, COVID was completely out of his control. It was terrifying, traumatizing, but he ultimately made it through. “I have become a better doctor and person because of it, and I enjoy the little moments in life. I take every chance I can to get away and have time with the family. Don’t take life for granted.”

Indeed, Dr. Otero and Dr. Mirabal make sure to prioritize family and raising their children. “His aunt lives with us and takes care of the kids when we work, and my Mom also helps,” Dr. Mirabal explains. And when the two doctors can get away from their jobs, they always make the most of it, particularly by going on vacation. “We’ve gone to the Dominican Republic, Arizona, California, Aruba, and other places.”

Working side-by-side, supporting each other as parents and doctors just as they did as students in ODASIS, Dr. Otero and Dr. Mirabal are closer than ever. Their impact is powerful, ranging from operations in hospitals to check-ups at a community health center. Braving challenges hand in hand, they are blazing a new trail of diversity in medicine, empowered by the family and resources of ODASIS. Their success inspires undergraduate students currently on the same path. As Dr. Otero said, “Meeting alumni motivates students to know that it’s possible.”

The Power of Delivery

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON



Dr. Tiffany Martinez and family

Standing in the back of a labor room, a young Dr. Tiffany Martinez watched breathlessly as a baby was brought into the world. Crammed among doctors, nurses, and family members, this new medical student suddenly was certain that this was what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. It was a beautiful moment, powerful and earth-shattering. “I was like, ‘What just happened?’” Dr. Martinez recalled. “There were five of us in the room and now there’s six.” It has

been this love for her practice that has motivated Dr. Martinez’ long career—both as a practicing OBGYN and as a successful owner of a business helping prospective gynecologists pass the oral boards.

Dr. Martinez’ revelation that she wanted to practice medicine also occurred in a medical office: her pediatrician. As a child, Dr. Martinez found a role model in her doctor, someone she could go to when she was feeling sick or afraid and come away with feeling better or hopeful. “He was someone I could look up to.”

While Dr. Martinez breezed through high school with good grades, this later made her overconfident when she arrived at Rutgers. “That first semester I got every letter of the alphabet: A, B, C, D, F” Dr. Martinez joked. “I was crying, my scholarships were being taken away, and I needed to figure out what to do with my life.” This is when she discovered ODASIS, desperate for support.

In ODASIS, Dr. Martinez found a family that helped her build back her grades and focus her career. “The tutoring was huge,” she remembers. Those in Dr. Martinez’s Student Instruction sessions also took her same classes, and soon they became close friends. Working alongside them, she began a focused path to medical school.

When first encountering gynecology in medical school, however, Dr. Martinez was not impressed. “I remember in one of the lectures for OB they were showing us pictures of STIs and I had to walk out. I was like, ‘I’ll never do OB.’” But once she got into the operating room, preparing and draping patients for surgery and helping with delivery, she fell in love. “I love that when you’re doing surgery with someone you really know you don’t have to speak at all,” she said. “It’s like a song and dance.” Dr. Martinez flowed naturally around the operating room, confident and passionate, creating ease in all her patients.

Dr. Martinez began by working in Morristown Medical Center and later Overlook Medical Center, in Morristown and Summit, New Jersey, respectively. Each day she worked morning and night to give women the reproductive care they deserve. Unfortunately, these hospitals were often not as diverse as they should have been, considering the communities in which they were situated. “Diversity is really important in these spaces especially because of the black maternal mortality crisis.” Dr. Martinez explains. “Being a black OBGYN woman, my patient’s risk of dying decreases because I’m there. I’m a mom, I’ve gone through labor, I’m a woman, and I’m black. There’s a common understanding.” She has changed countless lives through her work, despite many challenges.

The biggest hurdle was the COVID-19 Pandemic—a trial by fire. “It was so hard, but it made our team stronger. I didn’t even realize how exhausting it was until it was over. It helped me lead my department because you really couldn’t fail.” Having vulnerable family members at home, she remained extremely careful of her exposure to the virus despite the nature of her job. “I would have patients who were COVID positive, pushing, and would take their mask off. I was this close to COVID every day for two years.” Regardless, she made it through without ever becoming sick.

As the Director of Labor and Delivery at Overlook Medical Center, Dr. Martinez also hired many new underrepresented doctors for the hospital. “By the time I finished I had hired five physicians of color to show how diversity mattered,” she said. Indeed, this commitment to bringing a variety of faces into the medical field, and especially OBGYN, has been another defining factor of Dr. Martinez’ career.

Dr. Martinez’s ODASIS bonds never ended with her undergraduate studies, however. During her residency, an ODASIS alumni who had been four

years below her joined the program. “We kind of trailed each other,” Dr. Martinez recalled. Over the years she began to look out for this younger alum, frequently speaking with her and giving advice on education and the job search. “OBGYN can be tough in some respects. I wanted to make sure she knew that no matter how much you love it, this might not be the last job you have. This might not be the forever job. Just go in with your eyes wide open.” It was a lesson that resonated, and the experience inspired Dr. Martinez to begin her own private business for advising new OBGYNs in passing their oral exams.

Dr. Martinez has since begun working at the hospital per diem, only going in once a month, while she devotes most of her time to her business and her children. In fact, Dr. Martinez has put an immense amount of effort into making sure her children grow up with a strong education. “My son is seven, and he is bilingual—he reads, writes, and speaks in Spanish and English. It’s an hour and twenty-minute commute for me to the Spanish immersion school.” But because of her flexibility she can make this schedule work. “My husband is very supportive,” she adds about balancing her personal and work life. “And my family was visiting all summer long. My friend from ODASIS was over, too. You just plan and prioritize what means most to you.” Dr. Martinez was able to achieve this lifestyle because she followed the advice she gave to that young ODASIS student, and to all her OBGYN clients: do what you love.

Another thing Dr. Martinez loves is ODASIS, especially as she continues to encounter its products within her career. “The last hospital job that I had, several of the residents were products of ODASIS. This last April I had two of my previous residents from ODASIS Alumni event with me.” She also frequently returns to New Brunswick for events and donates a portion of her income to the program. “I know that someone’s money helped me get through, so why not help someone else.”

For a career defined by discovering what she loves and working hard to get there, Dr. Martinez has truly succeeded. Despite challenges, she has pushed through, helping others along the way to create a more inclusive healthcare system that better supports a diverse population of patients. Just as she delivers babies, bringing them into the world, Dr. Martinez delivers new and underrepresented faces into the medical field. This is the same mission that drives ODASIS and continues to propel medical students like her into fruitful careers.

Getting it Done, Together

WRITTEN BY MASON SPRINGER-LIPTON



Dr. Ricken Patel and Dr. Gayon Hyatt

Zippering between medical exam tables and playing along the chairs of the waiting room, Dr. Gayon Hyatt found her mother’s medical office to be like a second home. The doctors, nurses, and patients were welcoming—it was a place of safety and trust, and it inspired her into a medical career. Today, Dr. Hyatt’s own children play within her private practice family health office. “I am a mother first, and a doctor second,” Dr. Hyatt explains. Indeed, family and medicine are nearly one and the same in Dr. Hyatt’s family life: she is married to fellow ODASIS alumni and successful private dentist Dr. Ricken Patel. Together, they have carved out a truly inspiring life founded on medicine.

Dr. Patel’s most influential encounter with medicine was quite the opposite of Dr. Hyatt’s: it began with blood. “When I was around thirteen, I got high-sticked while playing floor hockey,” Dr. Patel explained. “My face went numb, and I spit out my teeth in my hand.” His family was financially disadvantaged, so they went driving around for hours to different dental practices searching for someone who would take their Medicaid insurance. By the time they found someone willing to take it, Dr. Patel’s condition had worsened, and he would later have to wear temporary teeth. This freak accident—a tragedy to an impressionable adolescent—stoked a fire in Dr. Patel to give patients quality and accessible dental care.

Dr. Hyatt and Dr. Patel both arrived at Rutgers in 2001, with Dr. Patel going through the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) program. It was due to this program that he learned about ODASIS, and it

was there that he quickly found a like-minded community. “It’s a group of people from a similar situation who were trying to reach similar goals,” Dr. Patel said. “ODASIS gave me that important exposure to medical education.” Dr. Hyatt learned about ODASIS through a friend, and it provided the focus educational pathway she needed during college. As she described, “There was this notion that, if you want to succeed, this is how you should do it and you have to put in the work. It was good to help things not feel overwhelming.”

Dr. Hyatt and Dr. Patel met during the ODASIS Biomedical Careers Program (BCP) during their junior year. “It was during the phase where you take summer classes at Robert Wood,” Dr. Hyatt said, then laughed. “But he never went to class.” Dr. Patel interjected with a smile, “Well, to be fair, I was self-taught and was taking it for the stipend and class credit.” The two medical students were as different as they come, but a group project on Sickle Cell Anemia brought them together. “That blossomed into a beautiful friendship,” Dr. Hyatt remembered. The rest is history.

With the support of each other and their ODASIS family, they graduated and pushed into medical and dental school. “I was an account executive out of college, just seeing if it would be interesting—but medical school was always the path I wanted to take,” Dr. Hyatt explained. It was a difficult journey for both, with roadblocks and setbacks a constant threat to their momentum. “But you have to keep pushing,” Dr. Patel said, “ODASIS prepared me for that. I take that into my dental practice every day.”

Indeed, both Dr. Patel and Dr. Hyatt live extremely busy and interconnected lives. “We wake up, get our two little ones ready, and our hearts are racing by the time we step out of the front door,” said Dr. Hyatt. “Each of us take one child to their respective schools.” Then they go to their offices.

Dr. Hyatt drives to her family medical practice in East Brunswick, New Jersey, a private practice she opened just six months ago. This new business has given more flexibility and breathing-room than she had while working in the “factory-mill” of the group practice and urgent care settings. “I like to spend time with my patients,” she said. “They love that I can give them dedicated time, and that I get to know them.” Her office sees a revolving door of patients diverse in background and age, from

infants to the elderly. And while Dr. Hyatt excels in the patient care and interpersonal aspects of her private practice, new challenges have emerged in the constant paperwork necessary for running the business. But she is learning constantly and perseveres just like ODASIS taught her. Near the end of the day, she picks up her children from their schools and brings them into the office. Making them comfortable with a couch and televisions, she skillfully balances motherhood and medicine.

Dr. Patel drives to one of the three dental practices he runs within the New Jersey area. “My phone calls begin on my way to work,” he explained. At the office he is always busy, frequently doing intensive cosmetic work on patients that can last hours at a time. He even brings with him huge duffle bags of equipment to whichever location he is working at that day. “When I’m not working with patients, I’m meeting with my team members,” Dr. Patel added. “Right now, I have close to 40 people—doctors, managers, assistants.” He also takes phone calls home, but always makes sure he spends quality time with his children, going to their events and being important to their life. “The work-life balance can be hard,” Dr. Patel admits, “But having a great partner makes it easier.” The most important team member in his life is, of course, his wife.

Between the two of them, the encouraging and loving spirit of ODASIS persists. They motivate

one another each day—as parents, doctors, spouses, and friends. “It’s a juggling act,” Dr. Hyatt said about her multifaceted life. “So I prioritize. There are always things that I must do.” At home, she makes a point to not do paperwork or take calls when possible, prioritizing her family. Even when the stress seems to be overpowering and insurmountable, Dr. Patel and Dr. Hyatt always tell each other, “We will get it done.” It was ODASIS that gifted them this mantra, all those years ago.

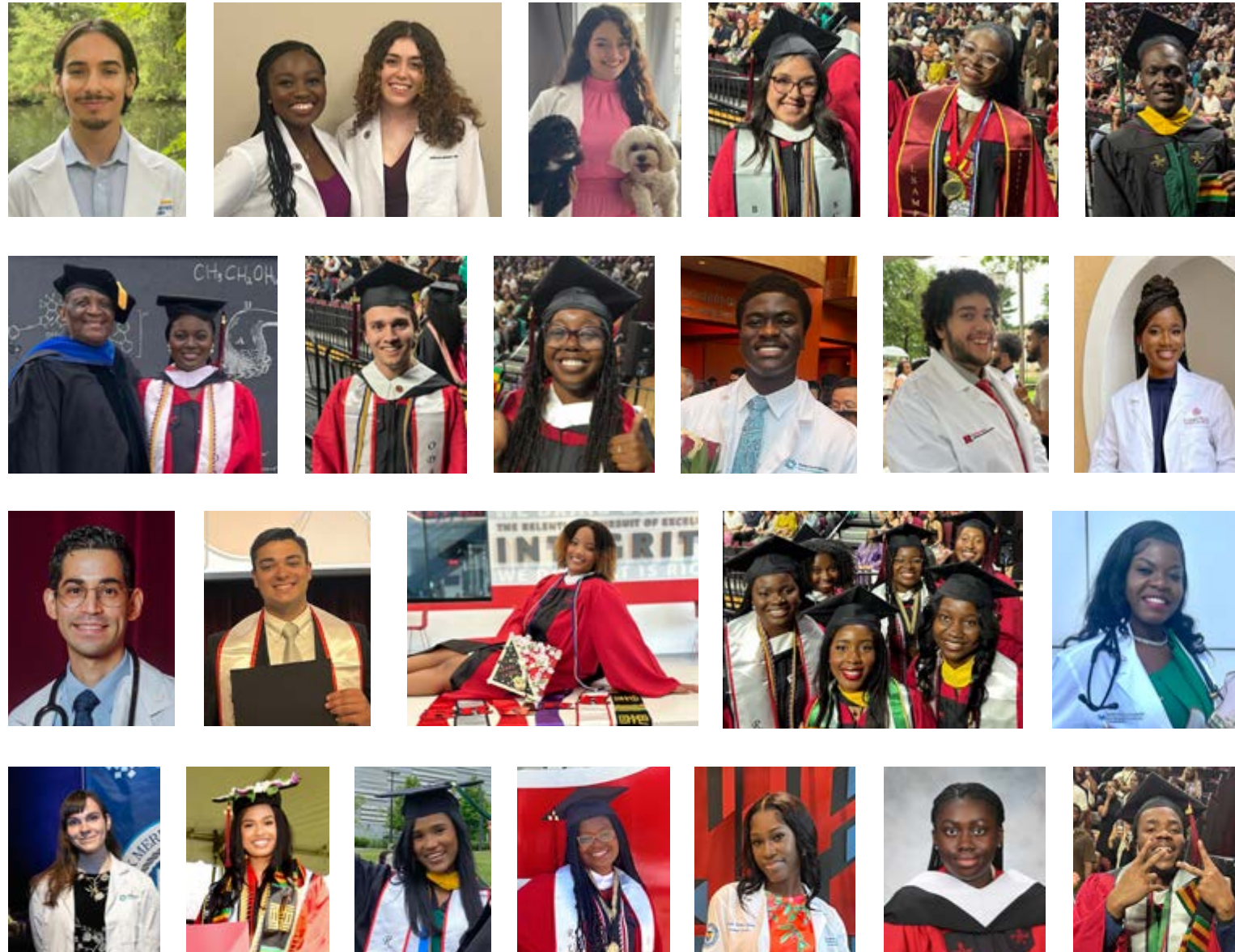
And Dr. Hyatt and Dr. Patel remain active in the ODASIS network, frequently returning to events and contributing financially. “It’s so important for promoting diversity in medicine,” Dr. Hyatt said. “As a black woman physician, there’s only two percent of us in the entire United States.” Dr. Hyatt grew up in Jamaica, and frequently encounters patients thankful for her unique identity as a doctor. Dr. Patel’s practice also reflects the diversity of New Jersey, both within his large team and thousands of patients. He even plans to allow ODASIS students to shadow him in the near future.

Going to the ODASIS graduation ceremony every year, returning to the places and people that were so formative for them, Dr. Hyatt and Dr. Patel find themselves inspired again. They beam seeing students soar academically, gain distinction, and go across the country. As Dr. Hyatt said, “It lights the fire in you to be a better doctor.”

1605 ODASIS GRADUATES FROM 1990-2024

Profession	Number (%)	Profession	Number (%)
Medicine (MD)	702 (43.7%)	Medicine / Public Health (MD / MPH)	5 (0.3%)
Osteopathy (DO)	132 (8.2%)	Chiropractic (DC)	4 (0.2%)
Biomedical Sciences (MBS)	62 (3.8%)	Biomedical Engineering (MBE)	4 (0.2%)
Dentistry (DMD / DDS)	46 (2.9%)	Law (JD)	3 (0.2%)
Biomedical Research	15 (0.9%)	Optometry (OD)	4 (0.2%)
Physician Assistant (PA)	14 (0.9%)	Medicine / Biomedical Sciences (MD / MBS)	3 (0.2%)
Podiatry (DPM)	16 (1.0%)	Research (PhD)	3 (0.2%)
Nursing (RN / BSN / LPN / MSN)	16 (1.0%)	Medicine / Business (MD / MBA)	1 (0.1%)
Medicine / Research (MD / PhD)	9 (0.6%)	Osteopathy / Law (DO / JD)	1 (0.1%)
Pharmacy (Pharm D)	19 (1.2%)	Master of Science (MS)	1 (0.1%)
Osteopathy / Biomedical Sciences (DO / MBS)	7 (0.4%)	Veterinary (DVM)	2 (0.1%)
Public Health (MPH)	8 (0.5%)	Other (e.g., business, education)	506 (31.5%)
Physical Therapy (PT)	22 (1.4%)		

Congratulations to the Undergraduates Taking the Next Step in 2024!



Allopathic Schools

Rutgers New Jersey Medical School

Leynier Cespedes (ED)
Esteban Quinones
Beryl Zonese (ED)
Henry Souto (ED)

Rutgers University School of Nursing - Newark

Ifeoluwa Adewale
(Accelerated BSN)

Sidney Kimmel Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University

Jordan Lyken

Emmanuel Worede-Kal

Daniel Jimenez

Chicago Medical School at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science

Krizia Aponte
Nana Biney
Kelvin Omori-Kwarteng
(Pre-Matriculation Program)

Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania

Oluwanifemi Adetunji

Jacobs School of Medicine and Biological Sciences at the University of Buffalo

Hulms Barthelus

St. George's School of Medicine

Fechi Nwodili

San Juan Bautista Medical School

Annery Carmona

Hackensack Meridian School of Medicine

Ebenezer Boah
Pepper Powell

Osteopathic Schools

New York Institute of Technology College of Osteopathic Medicine

Marco Garcia (EOF)

Liberty University College of Osteopathic Medicine

Oluwasemilore Omoniye

Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine - Montana

Jon Bermudez

Rowan-Virtua School of Osteopathic Medicine

Rhoda Ukenna-Izuwa

Congratulations to the Alumni Graduating from Graduate, Doctoral, or Professional Programs!



Allopathic Schools

Rutgers New Jersey Medical School

Sampson Abah
Jorge Alonso Caceda
Alexandra Gomez
Karla Larios
Cara Lescott
Jessenia Palacio-Meadows (EOF)
Halle Sarkodie
Maria Vega

Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School

Adedayo Adepoju
Christle Antwi-Buosiako
Gloria Awuku
Myrhaim Diarra
Bintia Sakho
Nnenna Ukenna-Izuwa
Christopher Wachuku

Sidney Kimmel Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University

Azra Dees
Maria Gomez
Danielle Grant
Steven Gravier-Leon (EOF)

Anika Valery

Cooper Medical School at Rowan University

Marie Beauvais

Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University

Malek Maddah

Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania

Christopher Stephen

Saint George's University School of Medicine

Autumn Forde

American University of Antigua College of Medicine

Aa'Mani Dennis

Osteopathic Schools

Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine

Kanya McRae

Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

Bharath Nagaraj
Lateefat Olawore

Percy Takyi (EOF)

Rowan-Virtua School of Osteopathic Medicine

Michael Anyanwu
Jennifer Nguyen (EOF)
Adrienne Williams

Dental Schools

Rutgers School of Dental Medicine

Sara Ezzat (EOF)
Genesis Perez (EOF)
Darling Rojas

College of Dentistry at Howard University

Derrick Johnson

Podiatric Schools

New York College of Podiatric Medicine

Thu Truong (EOF)

College of Podiatric Medicine at Western University of Health Sciences

Alexis Llaneras

Other Medical Programs

Pennsylvania College of Optometry at Salus University

Fayaz Vizam (EOF)

Rutgers, New Brunswick School of Graduate Studies

James Rapley

Jefferson College of Rehabilitation Sciences at Thomas Jefferson University

Ariel Cifuentes

University of Maryland Eastern Shore School of Pharmacy

Eugene Agho

Rutgers School of Nursing

Michelly Carvalho

Rutgers Doctor of Physical Therapy Program

Adedoyin Adepoju

Rutgers Physician Assistant Program

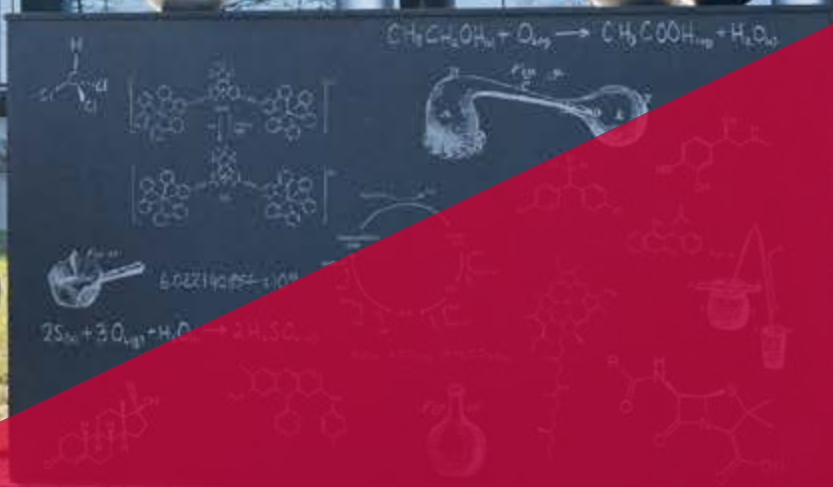
Towhid Ahmed (EOF)

Morehouse School of Medicine PA Program

Adam Khanu



RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK
School of Arts and Sciences



To help ODASIS push forward,
please consider donating.

