

Pre-Med, With Feeling

Senior Ben Claxton pursues his passion in the lab, the ambulance, and Africa

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Why would anyone leave Chocolatetown, U.S.A., for a state that brags about granite?

For Hershey, Penn., native Ben Claxton '14, the lure was the lab. Specifically, the opportunity for the pre-med student to get into a UNH laboratory and do research alongside faculty as an undergraduate.

He learned about faculty's eagerness to welcome undergraduates into their labs on a campus tour. "I didn't know it at the time, but that's really unheard of," he says.

Claxton, a biochemistry, molecular and cellular biology major, has been pursuing cancer research in professor Charles Walker's lab since his freshman year. A Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship, or SURF, grant from UNH's Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research jump-started his work with Walker.

He's now working on his honors thesis, looking at a protein called P53 that he calls "the guardian of the genome." Its role is to identify and remedy broken DNA, and when it malfunctions, rapid cell growth often occurs. Claxton is trying to identify and fix this cancer-causing glitch in P53.

His research gets help from regular care packages from Hershey: not Kisses or KitKats, but cells frozen in liquid nitrogen from Claxton's father, a doctor and cancer researcher at Penn State's Hershey Medical Center. "It's not every day that you get access to patient cells," he says. "They're the cream of the crop."

With his career sights set on medicine's triple threat – a career that, like his father's, encompasses patient care, research, and teaching – Claxton pursues research and coursework seriously. But he's quick to note that he's no lab rat.

"I left high school feeling like I hadn't made my mark, so I came here and joined everything," he says, laughing as he recalls signing up for at least 30 clubs at University Day his freshman year. Passionate about all his pursuits, Claxton necessarily winnowed and prioritized his extracurricular activities.

He served as a resident assistant in Alexander Hall as a sophomore, a job that gave his interpersonal skills a boost. He volunteers upwards of 70 hours per month with McGregor Memorial EMS, the ambulance squad that serves Durham, Madbury and Lee, relishing the unique insight into the medical field the experience provides. And he coaches students through chemistry 403 and 404 as a tutor in the department's Peer-Led Team Learning initiative.

Claxton's primary focus, though, is serving as chair of UNH Global Brigades and co-president of its Medical Brigades arm, the local division of an international student organization. Medical Brigades brings what he calls "boots on the ground public health outreach" to underserved communities in Nicaragua, Panama, Honduras, and, this year, Ghana.

Earlier this month, Claxton and 25 UNH undergraduates, mostly in pre-health majors, spent nine days in the Ekufmi district of Central Ghana running pop-up medical clinics in different communities with limited access to health care. The students, shadowing three Seacoast-area healthcare professionals who they recruited to join them, triage patients, perform routine tasks like taking blood pressure, and run a mini-pharmacy of medicines they brought from the U.S.

Claxton plans to take a year off between UNH and medical school, during which time he hopes to pursue a travel-related medical opportunity like this one. Aiming for some of North America's top medical schools, he says his UNH experience has prepared him well. "The resources here are good. Classes are strenuous, there's research and volunteering on campus, and there's access to everything you need to put yourself on the right track for medical school," he says.

"I do a fair amount of stuff, but I love it all." As for managing his busy life at UNH, Claxton is guided by organization and passion. "I do a fair amount of stuff, but I love it all."

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