

Meet the 2016 Winner of UT Southwestern's Most Prestigious Student Accolade

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Dr. Sam Parnell, winner of the Southwestern Medical Foundation's Ho Din Award. (Credit: SMF)

Dr. Samuel Parnell, the winner of UT Southwestern's most prestigious student accolade, considered being a crocodile hunter and a preacher and an engineer before he came to medicine. Eventually he whittled away the first two choices, ultimately earning an undergraduate degree in chemical engineering but completing the requirements for pre-med.

Where the two differed most, he noticed, was at the bedside. Engineering simply doesn't have the human element that he craved. He found it while interning for a Houston cardiologist.

"A light went off," he said. "I really decided that I could see myself doing this for the rest of my life. It was something that I could get up and really enjoy, interacting with patients and helping them get better."

He's followed that light through medical school at UT Southwestern. And last month he was presented with the Southwestern Medical Foundation's annual Ho Din

Award, which is given to a single senior each year who has embodied the height of both academics and community involvement. When he thinks back to it, the consideration to become a doctor occurred early in life. He always looked up to his pediatrician.

“I really liked the idea of helping people and really getting to know people,” he said.

He attended undergrad at the University of Texas at Austin. And in his sophomore year he interned for British Petroleum. (“It was actually the summer of the oil spill; I didn’t do it!” he joked. “I was on a completely different platform.”) The internship was challenging and interesting, but lacked the human interaction he craved. The next summer, he tackled the cardiology internship.

He sent off medical school applications to universities both in Texas and beyond. He eventually chose UT Southwestern.

“I interviewed at a lot of great institutions all over,” he says, “but Southwestern really struck me as not only having great clinical training, but also having really good people.”

Kathleen Gibson, president and CEO of Southwestern Medical Foundation (A philanthropic organization that supports the school and its affiliated programs, which also coordinates these awards each year) described Parnell as exceptionally wise. He maintained a 4.0 grade point average while attending school there, but he also “shows a quality of heart and service that you want to see.”

When this gets brought up to Parnell, he calls back to a memory he had while on his internal medicine block. He treated a woman with AIDs who refused to take any medicine. And against medical advice, she decided she wanted to leave. Parnell knew he couldn’t keep her there, but he sat down and kindly asked if there was anything he could do to change her mind.

The patient opened up to him. She told him that she had an unstable past, that she finally found steady employment waiting tables at a local restaurant and she didn’t want to lose it. “I was able to tell her about social work, and we were able to get social workers on board to help her with financial problems,” Parnell recalled.

But she also went further back, telling him about her unstable past, dotted with episodes of abuse at the hands of her mother.

“She had come not to trust doctors because growing up she had an abusive mother who was on drugs,” Parnell said. “She saw her mom in and out of facilities that tried to treat mental health and drug addiction, and it never worked.”

Over the course of the conversation, the patient came to trust her young doctor. He even convinced her to take her medicine.

“That was one of the most meaningful things that I ever did as a medical student,” he continued. “It wasn’t something fancy; it wasn’t diagnosing a really rare disease or doing a really cool procedure, it was just sitting down with the patient and earning her trust and seeing that she had a different perspective.”

Parnell’s next step is an emergency medicine residency at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, which he’ll begin in the fall.

“This is not just an award,” Parnell said. “It’s a reminder of how to treat patients and to continue to strive to provide excellent care with compassion and respect. I think it’s a reminder of what medicine is all about; it’s not about just treating diseases or making money, it’s really caring about people.”

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