Unique Mentoring Program Helps Make Doctors out of Athletes
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Georgia Schweitzer Beasley was one of the best womenÂ's basketball players Duke has ever seen. She won ACC player of the year honors twice, was a first-team All American and played for the WNBA for three seasons. But even as an undergraduate at Duke, Georgia knew there would be a life beyond basketball; she aspired to be a surgeon. Planning for that future was a tall order, though, with practice, games and travel taking up the majority of her time.
The summer before her junior year at Duke, Georgia spotted a young girl sitting on the bleachers next to a basketball court where she was practicing her shots. Georgia asked the girl, Sara, to help her catch rebounds, and the 11-year-old happily complied. Later, SaraÂ's dad came to pick her up and introduced himself to Georgia as Henry Friedman, deputy director of the Preston Robert Tisch Brain Tumor Center at Duke.

On the basketball court that day, CAPE was born. CAPEÂ—the Collegiate Athlete Pre-medical ExperienceÂ—is a unique mentoring program developed by Henry Friedman and fellow brain tumor center deputy director, neurosurgeon Allan Friedman. The program offers undergraduate female athletes the opportunity to shadow Duke doctors in clinical environments, meet and be mentored by female physicians, and have access to extra guidance in preparing for and applying to medical school.

Georgia was its first student-athlete; Henry Friedman and Allan Friedman offered her shadowing opportunities and guidance in the medical school application process. Since then, CAPE has grown to include 50 young women, all aspiring to be doctors and representing almost every sport Duke offers. The program has also expanded to include pre-med students in DukeÂ's Baldwin Scholars program, a selective program that offers mentoring and leadership opportunities to female undergraduates at Duke.

The students meet twice a month for Â"role model dinners,Â" where they hear from female doctors from various disciplines on the course of their careers and the challenges theyÂ've faced; or journal club, which simulates a facet of medical residency in which a medical article is read and discussed.

Each CAPE student spends time shadowing clinicians in the neuro-oncology clinic, and they also do six-week summer internships throughout the medical center where they can experience various types of medicine in practice Â– from primary care to thoracic surgery. The program also offers a chance to travel to Guatemala to work in a primary care clinic for a week in the summer, with Duke attending physicians serving as mentors.

Georgia is now a surgical intern at Duke. As an alumna of the CAPE program, she has the opportunity to interact with the current participants. Like sophomore Krystal Thomas.

As a kid growing up in Orlando, Florida, there were two things that Krystal,19, aspired to be Â– a basketball player and a doctor. She had the height, skill and brains to do both, but life put a few obstacles in her path.

When she was 11, her father, Victor, was arrested and sent to federal prison for seven years. Three months later, her mother, Natalie, who had inspired KrystalÂ's desire to become a doctor through her own work as a medical tech, was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Â“She never let it get her down,Â” Krystal said of Natalie, who had four younger children as well, the youngest just six months old when she was diagnosed. Â“She would get chemo in the morning and then drive me to practice that afternoon.Â”

Five years later, Natalie Thomas lost her battle with cancer. With Victor still in prison, the five kids were facing foster care until the family of one of KrystalÂ's teammates took them, adding to their brood of four.

Krystal, one of the top female basketball recruits in the country, had meanwhile secured a scholarship to Duke University.

Â“My motherÂ's death made me really want to come to Duke, because that was what she had wanted for me,Â” Krystal said.

Besides being a great place to play basketball, she knew a Duke education was going to lay the foundation for the medical career she had wanted since she was a little girl.

Â“I broke my arm when I was little, and that experience made me really want to become an orthopedic surgeon,Â” she said.

But with the time commitment required for practice and games, it was going to be a tough balancing act to make both dreams come true.

ThatÂ's where CAPE comes in.

Â“Women often have trouble finding mentors, and as a result many do not go into academic medicine, and thatÂ's a real loss,Â” said Henry Friedman. Â“This program really gives them confidence, and helps them find those mentors.Â”

As athletes, these young women have the perfect skill set for a career in medicine, said Terry Kruger, the programÂ's director. Â“They have those time management skills, and theyÂ're able to juggle so many things.Â”

Georgia and Krysal met two years ago, when Georgia was a medical student and Krystal a recruit on a visit to Duke.

Â“Krystal came with me to watch a surgery and we talked about what itÂ’s going to take for her to become a doctor,Â” Georgia said. Â“I told her not to let anyone tell her she canÂ’t do it.Â”

***Graduates of the CAPE program are now attending medical schools including Duke, Johns Hopkins, Emory, Vanderbilt, University of Pittsburgh, University of Miami and UT Southwestern.

For more information about the CAPE Program...