MedCats for Life: Multiple Class of 2013 med school grads have joined the faculty ranks

College of Medicine – Tucson
October 2023

Although the University of Arizona College of Medicine – Tucson doesn’t necessarily track this sort of thing, there’s a general consensus that the Class of 2013 may hold the record as the cohort with the most members on the faculty. Currently, more than 10% of the class’ members hold faculty positions at their alma mater.

"I think we all felt very committed and attached to the University of Arizona, and really enjoyed medical school," said Dr. Allison Lee Thoeny, residency program director for anesthesiology. "If we have such fond memories of it, it makes us want to come back and help shape the students we once were."

Joining Thoeny on the roster of 14 faculty members from the Class of 2013 are Dr. Daniel Butler, assistant dean for student affairs and associate professor of medicine, and Dr. Elaine Situ-LaCasse, assistant dean for student affairs and associate professor of emergency medicine. All three were born in Arizona, came to the University of Arizona for their undergraduate degrees, and knew they wanted to stay for medical school.

"The faculty, the staff, the students are all in it together. I saw that from afar, and wanted to be part of it," Butler recalled. "I was just elated when I got in."

"Throughout undergrad, I met a lot of people who left a lasting impression on me, such as when I started working in a lab for pediatric cancer research with Dr. Emmanuel Katsanis," Situ-LaCasse said. "It was a place I knew that I could not only grow into a physician, but also pursue any type of research and mentorship."

Making lifelong connections

The alumni remember an overwhelming sense of community during their medical school days with their fellow MedCats – a term used to describe not just the college's students, but also its faculty, staff and alumni.

"My core study group became my best friends. We'd figure out where to eat and then where to study," Thoeny recalled. "Studying seemed fun because you were with your friends. Sometimes we'd be there literally all night long."

"I loved being in class with people who were all in this together," Butler added. "You just have 100 people, and that builds a lot of camaraderie."

They say the camaraderie didn't stop with their classmates. Faculty were also invested in building these relationships, even inviting students over to their homes for meals.

"You really got to know your professors and your attendings really well," Thoeny said. "It wasn't just that they were purely teachers — you felt like they really cared about you as a person."

These days, having the opportunity to count their former mentors as colleagues is an added bonus.

"It is very strange to be calling our professors our colleagues now," Situ-LaCasse said. "I am so lucky to have as colleagues like Dr. Bill Rappaport [1], who is beloved by medical students, and (Professor Emeritus)Dr. Art Sanders."

The pull back to Tucson

Thoeny and Butler both left Arizona for residency training, but say Tucson eventually pulled them back into its orbit.

"My husband and I always had an interest in returning to Arizona to settle. We love the city of Tucson – the community and the environment," Thoeny said. "The major pull was being able to be a big part of shaping other trainees and medical providers as they're growing, to give back."

"Tucson has this 'big little city' feel to it. I always wanted to come back," Butler added. "For an academic training environment, it's unbeatable. Everyone is engaged in the same mission – and I love that."

Situ-LaCasse, on the other hand, never left. She recalls flying across the country to visit different residency programs.

"Being in and out of a city for less than 24 hours, blitzing through in-person interviews and tours of hospitals, you use your home program as a yardstick to compare other programs to," she recalled. "Time and again, it was difficult to beat our faculty members here."

Mirror images
Butler, Situ-LaCasse and Thoeny are now all involved in medical education, and see themselves in their students. Being on the other side of the lectern gives them the chance to mirror what their mentors did for them more than a decade ago: guiding their trainees on their journeys, watching them grow and getting to know them on a personal level.

“When we were students, we had the vulnerability, the fear, the excitement. You can't forget what that was like. When I'm lecturing in that lecture hall, I think of the exact place I sat, and where all my friends and other classmates sat,” Butler said. “There was so much belief in me here. People thought I could be better than I was, and I was able to work through my mistakes. That's something I'll never forget, and I wanted to be able to give those opportunities to students here.”

Situ-LaCasse draws inspiration by helping her students find their future specialty from among a myriad of options.

“It's a big decision they have to make in a relatively short period of time,” she said. “Not only are we here to help them through challenges, we are also here to celebrate with them when they become the wonderful physicians we know they will be.”

Other members of the Class of 2013 who are faculty members:

- Josie G. Acuña, assistant dean for curricular affairs-clinical competency and associate professor of emergency medicine
- Charlene Clements, clinical assistant professor of family and community medicine
- Anna-Marie Cosentino, clinical assistant professor of pediatrics
- Mali Drachman, clinical assistant professor of emergency medicine
- James Fox, clinical assistant professor of emergency medicine
- Galen Garcia, clinical assistant professor of anesthesiology
- Alex Perry, clinical assistant professor of medicine
- Jennifer Plitt, clinical assistant professor of medicine
- Keith Primeau, clinical assistant professor of emergency medicine
- Amber Rice, associate professor of emergency medicine
- Brian Clark Smith, clinical associate professor of psychiatry

A version of this story [2] was originally posted on the College of Medicine – Tucson website.

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