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DREAM OF MEDICAL CAREER MOVING CLOSER TO REALITY

TUPELO, Miss.—Maggie Blackwell of Tupelo knows it will take several years to earn her medical degree but that's okay. After all, she's been preparing for a career as a doctor since she was in junior high.

Her grandmother and namesake, Maggie Blackwell, suffered from congestive heart failure until her death in January 2006. "My grandmother was in and out of the hospital all my life," she said. "As a child, I had asthma and was in and out of doctors' offices. Being a doctor is just something I always wanted to do."

Blackwell, now 21, participated in North Mississippi Medical Center's Summer Health Academy after she completed eighth grade. Each summer, this program introduces 25 junior high students to various careers in health care. Students spend one week with nurses, physicians, radiologic technologists, pharmacists, physical therapists and others who are eager to share their expertise and enthusiasm.

The next summer, after completing ninth grade, Blackwell participated in NMMC's Advanced Summer Health Academy. This three-day program allows students a more in-depth orientation to certain hospital departments.

After 10th grade, Blackwell was selected as an NMMC Student Volunteer. She helped on NMMC's pediatric and orthopedic units, and she also was able to "job shadow" some individuals who work in interesting fields.

The next few summers Blackwell worked at "paying" jobs, but after her sophomore year at Mississippi College, she returned to NMMC to do volunteer work with Short Stay Surgery, Garfield Clinic and HealthWorks!

Blackwell said the summer programs helped maintain her interest in the medical field. "In the health academies I got to see a lot of different specialties that are available within the hospital," she said. "If one thing isn't interesting to me, then there are other things that really interest me. When I was volunteering I got to see how doctors and nurses work with patients."

Last summer she spent a few days with Dr. Deanna Nabors, a physician who practices pediatrics and internal medicine at West Tupelo Medical Clinic. Over Christmas holidays she spent time with Dr. David Gilliland, a general surgeon at NMMC.

Now a rising senior majoring in biology and medical sciences, Blackwell recently completed NMMC's month-long Physician Shadowing program. Like the other nine students selected this summer, she spent 30-40 hours each week with family physicians, surgeons, radiologists, cardiologists, emergency physicians and others.

"The Physician Shadowing program has really given me an inside look into the different specialties that doctors can go into," she said. "The doctors were very helpful and honest—they told me the good and the bad." She has taken the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) and is applying to medical school at the University of Mississippi, University of Tennessee and University of Alabama at Birmingham.

When Blackwell was younger, she said a lot of things she observed were beyond her grasp. "Now a lot of things I've seen make more sense to me because of all the college classes I've had," she said.

This summer Blackwell was fascinated by an arteriogram she observed surgeon Dr. Ray Orgler perform and a triple coronary artery bypass surgery by cardiothoracic surgeon Dr. David Talton. She was intrigued by watching pulmonologist Dr. David Reed perform a tracheotomy and his partner Dr. Will Edmondson orchestrate bronchoscopy. She learned a great deal about diabetes and thyroid disorders, neonatal intensive care, and pathology. She found colonoscopy at the Center for Digestive Health interesting, and she enjoyed the thrill of the Emergency Department.

But she's still leaning toward pediatrics, the medical specialty that focuses on children. "I still have a lot of exploring to do," she said.

The Health Care Foundation of North Mississippi funds the program through the P.K. Thomas Jr., M.D., Endowed Scholarship Fund. Each student receives hourly compensation, a lab coat and support materials. For more information, call (662) 377-3245 or 1-800-THE DESK (1-800-843-3375).

Suggested Cutline

Dr. David Hooker (right) of the NMMC Emergency Department reviews a chest X-ray with Physician Shadowing student Maggie Blackwell.