



The Real Book

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Dr. Alyx Porter
Umphrey, neuro-
oncologist,
co-founder of
ElevateMeD

The Next Generation

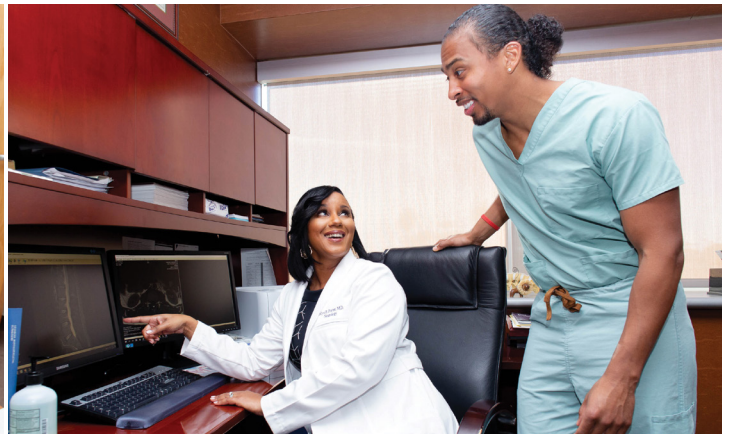
Physician starts nonprofit to confront the challenges of medical workforce diversity

Text by MIGNON A. GOULD ❖ Photos by DEANNA S. REID

What child has not at one time dreamed of becoming a doctor and saving lives? Unfortunately, that childhood dream can be a far-reaching fantasy for some, especially those who come from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Financing medical school is one of the many barriers that can make such a dream unattainable. Those who overcome the financial obstacles through student loans have the opportunity to pursue a medical education but incur insurmountable debt.

In 2020, Arizona native Dr. Alyx Porter Umphrey, the leading African-American woman neuro-oncologist in the nation, and her husband—New Mexico native Dr. Greg Umphrey, a physical medicine and rehabilitation physician—founded ElevateMeD to address the barriers that make attending medical school prohibitive for people of color.

Porter Umphrey shares their motivation to found ElevateMeD. “We wanted to create what we wished we had,” she says. “Both of us come from very supportive families, but neither of our families are



FROM LEFT: Dr. Gregory Umphrey provides direct mentorship to medical student and advisory board member Sophia Ederaine; Dr. Alyx Porter Umphrey and emergency medicine resident Joshua Ellis review medical imaging

quite wealthy—full of joy and support, but not necessarily the dollars needed to support our medical education.”

The Umphreys—who met while in residency training at Mayo Clinic in Minnesota—graduated with more than half a million dollars in debt, combined.

They worked hard to pay off their loans and when they had paid their school debt in full, they went out to celebrate. During dinner, the idea for ElevateMeD was conceived.

“We started to think about what just happened. What did we do? We realized that every decision we made, we had our debt in mind. We were fortunate that we made it this far in our careers and neither one of us had mentors that looked like us. Ultimately, we wanted to create ElevateMeD—what we wish we had,” Porter Umphrey says.

Porter Umphrey describes the scholarship program as holistic and unique—being “more than just a scholarship dispensary” and an investment in students’ success. In addition to receiving a scholarship, each student also has access to leadership training and development, financial management education, a peer network and individual physician mentorship.

Mentoring is a critical component of the scholarship program, where students have a concordant mentorship. “I am the first Black woman neuro-oncologist, which means there’s not someone who looks like me, doing what I do and older than I am,” she says. “While I had very thoughtful mentors and those people who continue to be champions of my career, I certainly see the value in having mentors that share your same culture.”

For 26-year-old Shannon Coombs, a third-year medical student at Mayo Clinic Alix School of Medicine, mentoring has been an impactful and integral part of the scholarship

program. “My ElevateMeD mentor, Dr. Nioke Wright, has been a constant source of peace and comfort in my third year of medical school. I check in with her during every rotation to reflect on my experiences,” Coombs says.

Porter Umphrey understands the importance of this opportunity for emerging physicians and its impact on the future of health care. “I have never been more certain that our future is bright. These brilliant medical students embody the drive, resilience and tenacity that is required to effect change regarding the disparities we see in health care,” she says.

The experience can be pivotal to the continued success of medical students who are accepted into the prestigious program. To be considered for the program, students must be pursuing an M.D. or D.O. degree from an accredited allopathic or osteopathic medical school. They must identify as Black/African-American, Hispanic/Latinx or Native American/Indigenous, be in good academic standing and have a faculty recommendation.

ElevateMeD selects students from partner schools across the U.S., including colleges located in Arizona such as The University of Arizona College of Medicine in Tucson and Mayo Clinic Alix School of Medicine in Phoenix and Scottsdale, as well as historically Black institutions including Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, D.C., and Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles.

In May 2021, the program will offer \$150,000 in scholarships to 15 students from 15 schools, 10 of which will be third and fourth-year students.

Scholarship funds are raised through individual and corporate donations in addition to an annual fundraising event called Explosion of a Dream, which has been held since 2019. The upcoming event will be held Oct. 2, 2021, at Scottsdale Airpark. ❖

CLOCKWISE: Dr. Alyx Porter Umphrey, Joshua Ellis, Brianna Giles, Dr. Gregory Umphrey, Shannon Coombs, Sophia Ederaine and Johanny Lopez Domiguez

