Focused on Making a Difference in the Lives of Others

When she was only 7 years old, Roopali Kulkarni (D’19) started on a six-year journey of extensive dental interventions and what felt like a never-ending sequence of being fitted for appliances.

“I went for years feeling unhappy about my smile and my appearance,” says Roopali. “I still remember the day my braces were removed. I glided by tongue along my teeth and grinned from ear to ear. I finally felt confident in myself.”

Roopali’s new-found confidence as a young teen blossomed into a career epiphany. If dental work could make such a difference in her life, could she learn to do the same for others? “I knew then that I wanted to instill that same confidence in others and pursue a career in dentistry,” she says.

Focus on Dentistry and Public Health

Before starting at Penn Dental Medicine, Roopali took a gap year and worked as a research assistant on a health literacy study—an opportunity that broadened her career aspirations. She learned the power that health care providers have in influencing and empowering patients to take better care of themselves and just how important the oral-systemic health connection is.

“During that project, I conducted interviews with study participants to learn how older adults understand their own health and well-being,” she explains. “That interaction proved to me that I needed to establish good relationships with my patients in order to communicate effectively with them about their health and make a difference in their lives.”

To help her better develop those interpersonal skills, Roopali decided to combine her studies in dentistry with public health. As a dual-degree candidate for a DMD and a master’s in public health, she is focusing on how public health and dentistry align through oral medicine. Through an internship working at Living Independently for Elders in West Philadelphia, her work in a community honors program, and an independent study project, she has developed a fondness for working with seniors.

“I not only want to practice dentistry but want to provide specialized care to a geriatric population and medically complex patients,” she says. The dual-degree program is helping her meet that goal.

“In dentistry we tend to focus on the millimeter, while in public health we focus more on the landscape. This dichotomy has allowed me to grow throughout the past three years in school and shown me how I can make a bigger difference as a dental professional,” she says.