



STUDENT PROFILE:
ROOPALI KULKARNI (D'19)

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.

FOCUSING 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.

DEVELOPING PROFESSIONALLY

While Roopali was attracted to Penn because of its inspiring people, unique energy, and academic rigor, she also found it a great fit for her outgoing personality — particularly with the opportunities available in the school's American Student Dental Association (ASDA) chapter.

ASDA is a national student-run organization that protects and advances the rights, interests, and welfare of dental students. It introduces students to lifelong involvement in organized dentistry and provides services, information, education, representation, and advocacy.

"I have found my community in this association. It has provided me with lifelong friends, professional development, leadership opportunities, and the chance to engage with dental students and professionals from across the country," she says.

Roopali, who has recently been elected as the national president of ASDA, has also served on the national Board of Trustees as the District 3 Trustee, where she represents Penn and other regional schools by helping to plan programming that helps members better manage the issues affecting dental students and professional life. She was also selected to represent ASDA to the American Dental Association Advisory Committee on Annual Meetings. She is helping to plan the Association's annual conference in Honolulu this October.

"This has been a huge honor, and I hope to continue staying involved with organized dentistry post-graduation," she says. "Dentistry is stronger when we all stand together and it's important for students and practicing dentists to be involved, to lend our voices to important issues."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

With her third year at Penn Dental Medicine nearing completion, Roopali is excitedly looking forward to achieving her dream in dentistry. "Dentistry combines the best of all of my interests, skills, and passions, and I'm excited for my future," she says.

That future may also include making time to stay involved in academia.

"I have had great mentors who have demonstrated their willingness to help me achieve my goals — I'd like to do the same," she says. "As part of my career vision, I would love to serve as a part-time faculty member at a dental school and help guide the next generation of dental professionals and leaders."