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— EMILY HUANG (D'21)

# PAYING IT FORWARD

## DENTAL STUDENTS AND UNDERSERVED PATIENTS ALIKE REAP REWARDS FROM THE NHSC'S SCHOLARSHIP AND LOAN FORGIVENESS PROGRAMS

THROUGH THE HIGHLY COMPETITIVE National Health Service Corps (NHSC) scholarship program, top medical, dental, nursing, and physician assistant students at American universities receive funding for their education in exchange for job placement at community health care facilities in underserved areas after graduation. For each year of their scholarship, graduates complete a year of paid service at one of more than 5,000 NHSC-approved community health sites, which provide affordable, high-quality care to underserved populations in urban and rural settings.

The NHSC selects candidates with excellent grades, interest and commitment to public service, and financial need. Across the country, around 1,300 students currently receive NHSC scholarships for a minimum of two years and a maximum of four years. Fewer than 100 are dental students, and of those, an impressive 11 are currently studying at Penn Dental Medicine. (See full list on page 34.)

Graduates of medical and dental schools across the country, including Penn Dental Medicine, also apply for the NHSC's loan repayment program, which provides additional funds to allow recipients to reduce their educational debt by working at NHSC sites. For both underserved patients and financially burdened dental students and graduates with an interest in public health, NHSC's scholarship and loan forgiveness programs are a win-win situation.

"My mission has always been to become a compassionate and culturally competent dentist who provides patient-centered care," says Emily Huang (D'21), one of Penn Dental Medicine's current scholarship recipients. "As an NHSC scholar, I am even more confident that I will have the opportunity to make a true difference."

"The financial weight lifted off my shoulders is just a bonus to knowing that I can contribute in improving the quality of life for others," adds NHSC scholar Lynn Le (D'20). "After graduating from Penn, I would like to move back to Florida to serve my commitment in a community health center there."

### FILLING THE GAPS IN COMMUNITY CARE

The NHSC grew out of the health care crisis of the 1950s and '60s, when general physicians retired at high rates and medical students began choosing more lucrative specialties over private practice, leaving poor urban and rural communities with few primary care options. The government formed the NHSC in 1972 to fill the gaps, and today more than 11 million Americans rely on NHSC sites for primary care.

From 2000-2001, Dr. Joan Gluch, Chief of the Division of Community Oral Health, served on a national committee that expanded the NHSC program to include dentistry.

"More dentists choose to practice in suburbs and wealthier urban neighborhoods than in poor neighborhoods and rural areas," Dr. Gluch says. "The NHSC's dental program plays a huge role in righting these imbalances by providing financial incentives to practice in an underserved region."

LEFT: Current National Health Service Corps scholars at Penn Dental Medicine (see full list, page 34).

# NHSC PROGRAMS

## A COMMUNITY-FOCUSED CAMPUS

For the competitive NHSC scholarships, Penn Dental Medicine applicants have the advantage of a campus that actively promotes student involvement in service initiatives and has community-based service learning as a required part of the curriculum.

“From the first year of dental school, we provide a learning environment that offers consistent, in-depth community experience, allowing our students to build the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in community settings,” says Dr. Gluch, who has assisted many students in applying for NHSC scholarships.

## SERVING NATIONWIDE

NHSC scholars and loan repayment participants apply for many varied approved practice sites across the country, from major urban centers to remote villages. Presently, there are more than 2,070 NHSC-approved dental sites across the country, with sites in every state. (Florida, California, and Michigan are among the states with the highest numbers of sites.) Graduates have up to six months after graduation to find employment at an NHSC site through an online list of openings, and site placement is often deferred when graduates complete general, pediatric or public health residencies.

There is a misconception that NHSC requires graduates to work for free, when in reality they are paid a competitive market salary in their NHSC approved position after receiving the NHSC scholarship funds. Those graduates participating in the loan repayment program receive funds each year to reduce their debt burden in addition to their salary.

“NHSC loan repayment funds provide targeted incentives to place dentists in under-served locations most in need,” Dr. Gluch explains. “The NHSC scholarship program allows graduates the freedom to work in community settings without the large financial debt burden common to many young dentists.” Together, both the NHSC scholarship and loan repayment programs serve a vital role to increase access to dental care by increasing the number of dentists in underserved areas.

Since 2007, 18 NHSC scholars have graduated from Penn Dental Medicine, going on to serve at sites nationwide. Here we highlight a few of those scholars along with an alumna working in the NHSC loan repayment program.



**DR. CHRISTINE (BENDER) MYLES (D'08):  
MAKING AN IMPACT**

For alumna Dr. Christine (Bender) Myles (D'08), being an NHSC scholar led to 10 years of service at a federally qualified health center.

After graduating from Penn Dental Medicine in 2008, Dr. Myles moved to Pawtucket, R.I., about 10 minutes outside Providence, to join the dental staff at Blackstone Valley Community Health Care, situated in a federally designated health professional shortage area. There, the NHSC scholar completed her three-year NHSC service assignment and two years of NHSC loan repayment, then decided to remain at Blackstone in this public health role.

“I treated underserved patients from infancy through old age in a community that included a lot of immigrants,” she says of her years at Blackstone. “The need for basic dental care and oral health education was great, and I really felt like I was making an impact.”

Dr. Myles was named Director of Clinical Dentistry at Blackstone in 2011, taking over the position that had previously been held by another Penn Dental Medicine graduate, Dr. Lalita Battacharya (D'84), who went on to become Blackstone's Director of Dental Education and Programming. When Dr. Battacharya left Blackstone in 2016, Dr.

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— ANDREW NG (D'20)

Myles was promoted to Dental Director, taking over Dr. Battacharya's role and continuing with her existing responsibilities. Gloria Hwang-Forzano (D'09) had the opportunity to work with both fellow alumnae while she completed a two-year NHSC service assignment at Blackstone; she left in 2014.

While Dr. Myles worked at Blackstone, the clinic consisted of a freestanding dental office in downtown Pawtucket, with 11 operatories, five full-time general dentists, and one part-time oral surgeon. Just after she left, the clinic opened a second location, adding eight operatories and additional staff.

With a desire to move closer to family, Dr. Myles left Rhode Island for Pittsburgh, Pa., last summer. While no longer working in a public health setting, she continues to provide much-needed community service in her current practice. A mother of two, she currently works for a for-profit, Pittsburgh-based company called Big Smiles, which provides traveling dentists to schools throughout western Pennsylvania, including many in remote and economically disadvantaged communities.

Dr. Myles and her staff of two assistants and a hygienist carry their equipment into each school in suitcases, working with school nurses to identify, evaluate, and treat children who need care. The team practices all facets of dentistry that can be complet-

ed without sedation, including extractions, stainless steel crowns, and space maintainers. With permission from their parents, the children are able to receive care during the school day and return home on time with stronger, healthier teeth. Dr. Myles and her colleagues also provide their young patients with education and dental supplies.

“We’re providing a tremendous service to children who otherwise might never see a dentist,” she says. “In schools that have a long-term mobile dentist, we see a dramatic difference in the level of care and hygiene.”



**DR. JOSHUA SIMPSON (D’16):  
FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT**

As Josh Simpson (D’16) completes his three-year NHSC scholarship service commitment at Philadelphia FIGHT, a clinic in Center City for underserved residents, including those living with HIV, he often thinks of family friend and former NHSC scholar Dr. John “Jack” Dewolf (D’81). Dr. Dewolf’s experience at Penn Dental Medicine and subsequent NHSC service in Lakewood, Wis., led Dr. Simpson to apply to the School — and later the scholarship program — himself.

“Penn stood out for me because of the people,” he says, remembering his interview day. “I was impressed by my fellow applicants, current students, and faculty.” (Dr. Simpson now has a faculty appointment at Penn, supervising students on clinical rotations at FIGHT, and teaching in the first- and second-year community oral health courses.)

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As a Penn Dental Medicine student, Dr. Simpson completed the honors program in clinical dentistry. “Knowing that I was already committed to public health through the NHSC, I wanted to develop my clinical skills as much as possible prior to beginning my service commitment,” he says. “Honors clinic was the perfect venue for that, helping me learn dentistry from a ‘why, not how’ perspective and ultimately preparing me to apply those clinical skills in a public health setting.”

After graduation, Dr. Simpson completed a one-year general practice residency at St. Luke’s University Hospital in Bethlehem, Pa., before returning to Philadelphia for his NHSC service. He learned about Philadelphia FIGHT from his fellow alumna, Dr. Kari Hexem (D’15), FIGHT’s Dental Director and a Clinical Assistant Professor in Penn Dental Medicine’s Division of Community Oral Health.

“We’re caring for the people who truly need it most,” Dr. Simpson says of his work at Philadelphia FIGHT. “Patients present with decayed and abscessed teeth to the point it’s debilitating. Being able to smile and eat without pain is life-changing for them.”

He is grateful for the opportunity that his NHSC service commitment has provided.

“Working at an FQHC gives you the benefits and flexibility of working for a practice with a corporate structure, except the organizational focus is non-profit, patient-centered care,” says Dr. Simpson. Looking ahead, he plans to make public health a continued priority throughout his career.



**DR. NGOZI OKOH (D’12):  
A COMMUNITY ROLE MODEL**

After graduating from Penn Dental Medicine in 2012 and completing her pediatric dentistry residency at Yale-New Haven Hospital in 2015, Dr. Ngozi Okoh (D’12) spent two-plus years fulfilling her NHSC scholarship service commitment at Greater Philadelphia Health Action (GPHA), a NHSC-approved site providing medical, dental, and behavioral health care. As the first and only pediatric dentist at GPHA, she treated patients whose families were accustomed to leaving their neighborhoods in order to see a dental specialist willing and able to treat their children.

“The families I saw in Frankford and Point Breeze really appreciated having a specialist in the neighborhood,” she says. “And, as a black female dentist in largely black communities, I was able to set an example for the children of what is possible.”

Dr. Okoh, who grew up in New York City, chose Penn Dental Medicine because it offered a chance to learn “a little bit of everything. I was never pigeon-holed,” she says. “It was hands-down the best training I could have received.”

The mother of an infant son, she is currently working at Children’s Dental Health in West Philadelphia, where she treats mostly Medicaid patients, immigrants, and refugees. This summer, she plans to open her own practice, Farm Park Pediatric Dentistry, in East Norriston, Pa., which will also serve Medicaid recipients in the underserved areas around Norristown and Northwestern Philadelphia suburbs. Her staff will be comprised of a receptionist, expanded function dental assistant, hygienist, and office manager.

## NHSC PROGRAMS

In June of 2018, Dr. Okoh returned to campus to moderate a pre dental recruitment workshop organized by several Penn Dental Medicine organizations, including the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the Student National Dental Association.

"When asked to be the moderator, I was humbled and excited to be able to speak to students whose shoes I walked in not long ago," she says. "As a pre dental student, I remember looking up to minority dentists with so much hope and ambition in my heart. I can only hope to be a tangible role model to the young aspiring dentist."

"NHSC is a very plausible way to help with your education financially while allowing you to do a lot of good," she adds. "There is never enough caring and compassion in health care. It's fulfilling to help change that."



**DR. RENEE SCHAEFER (D'09):  
GOING HOME TO GIVE BACK**

Born and raised in Hughestown, Pa., Dr. Renee Schaefer (D'09) always knew she would return home after dental school to give back to underserved families. After completing her residency at Sacred Heart Hospital in Allentown, Dr. Schaefer accepted a position at Scranton Primary Health Care Center, a federal qualified health care center, as part the NHSC's loan repayment program.

Dr. Schaefer worked as the center's Dental Director for five years, overseeing a staff of two full-time dentists, one hygienist, six expanded-function dental assistants, two receptionists, and a billing manager. Although she enjoyed her administrative role, she is

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— LYNN LE (D'20)

now focusing her energies on patient care. "I wanted to commit solely to clinical dentistry to make a difference in more patients' lives," she says.

Caring for patients with advanced caries and medical complications, she knows her work is filling a significant void. "Our patients have a dental home here where they feel comfortable and cared for," she says.

A born teacher, Dr. Schaefer has happy memories of working on the PennSmiles van while a dental student, visiting and talking to children about dental hygiene. She continues to enjoy staffing community health fairs and has educated local medical residents about oral health.

In addition to her dental degree, Dr. Schaefer holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Scranton in Biology along with two minors in Biochemistry and English. She graduated from the University of Scranton in 2003 with a Master's of Clinical Chemistry.

After moving back to the Scranton area, she started her own tutoring business at the University of Scranton, and also tutors Scranton Prep High School students in chemistry and biology.

Dr. Schaefer plans to remain at Scranton Primary Health Care Center.

"It is dear to my heart to give back to my home," she says. "Now I'm taking care of the people who took care of me." ■

— By Juliana Delany

## PENN DENTAL MEDICINE'S NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE CORPS SCHOLARS

Penn Dental Medicine currently has eleven NHSC Scholars, "a significant number" for one dental school at one time, says Dr. Joan Gluch, Chief of Penn Dental Medicine's Division of Community Oral Health. In addition, two current fourth-year students are the recipients of NHSC's Students to Service loan repayment scholarship, awarded to fourth-year students in return for a three-year NHSC commitment after graduation.

For Andrew Ng (D'20), the NHSC scholarship has made a world of difference. "It relieved much of the financial burden of dental school and allowed me to focus solely on being an excellent clinician," he says. "With tuition covered in full, a monthly stipend, and a guaranteed job after graduation, I can devote all of my energy to classes and clinic." After fulfilling his service requirement, Andrew hopes to continue giving back to NHSC sites in some capacity throughout his career.

Here are our current NHSC scholarship recipients, listed below in order of class year:

Aslam Aiman (D'19)

Aiya Al-Beyati (D'20)

Catherine Dang (D'20)

Esther Hong (D'20)

Lynn Le (D'20)

Andrew Ng (D'20)

Emily Huang (D'21)

Ramon Penaranda (D'21)

Soo Won Seo (D'21)

Pouria Farhadi Amiri (D'22)

Morgan Rhodes (D'22)

Our current NHSC Students to Service scholarship recipients include:

Lisenia Collazzo (D'19)

Austin Labbe (D'19)