

STUDENT PROFILE:
SARA DANIEL (D'20)



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Sara feels that the course represents a critical piece of dental education. “It’s important for all dental students, regardless of the specialty they pursue, to have experience with special needs patients,” she says.

NEW LEADERSHIP

Now in her fourth year and making postgraduate plans, Sara is no longer president of the AADMD, although the organization’s activities still remain a priority for her.

“We elected a phenomenal third-year student, Michelle Feldman (D’21), to take over as president,” says Sara. “We have worked closely together over the last couple of years on a lot of great initiatives, and I strongly believe that under her leadership the AADMD will rise to new heights.”

The AADMD recently received confirmation of a key project that Michelle and the group worked hard on last year, a collaboration between Penn Dental Medicine and St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children for a program that will bring dental students into schools for people with disabilities, where they will provide education on oral health. The AADMD looks forward to launching the program soon.

Sara, who is currently applying and interviewing for residencies in orthodontics, appreciates the insight and firsthand learning that the AADMD experiences have provided.

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A Champion for Patients with Special Needs

As a first-year student at Penn Dental Medicine, a personal interest led Sara Daniel (D’20) to join Penn’s chapter of the American Academy of Developmental Medicine and Dentistry (AADMD), which promotes programs and policies to advance the care of patients with special needs. The group and its mission would become an important focus of her extracurricular experience for the next three years.

The AADMD’s mission struck a chord with Sara, whose family settled in Miami after coming to the United States from Haiti. Sara’s uncle has autism, and her family has always struggled to find good care for him.

“So many healthcare professionals react to him with insensitivity and frustration,” she says. “Dentistry can be scary for the average patient, let alone for someone with special needs. We can take an active role to prevent dental care from becoming a traumatic experience for these patients.”

MAKING PEOPLE SMILE

Sara, who grew up with a love of science, shadowed professionals in numerous fields through high school and college. “Dentists seemed to have it all,” she says. “They actively use their hands all day. They get to interact one-on-one with patients. And,” she adds, “they make people smile.”

Sara arrived at Penn Dental Medicine determined to do just that for dental patients with disabilities, becoming increasingly involved in the AADMD as the years passed. In her second year, she was named vice president

of the group, and last year she was chosen as its president. In that role, she led members in attending walks and runs for people with disabilities and volunteering at Carousel House, a city-sponsored social and recreational program for Philadelphia residents with disabilities.

A CRITICAL PIECE OF DENTAL EDUCATION

The group also sponsored a new course in Penn Dental Medicine’s Selectives program, which offers elective mini-courses designed by students and faculty. The course, “Specialties and Special Needs,” featured practitioners in pediatric dentistry and oral medicine who discussed techniques for treating special needs patients. It turned out to be a significant learning experience for her and for her fellow students.

“We learned that it’s important to be adaptable and willing to change our approach on the spot based on the needs of the patient. It’s also important for us to be very confident in our actions without rushing,” she says. The popular course also focused on how to build empathy, and discussed the value of the “tell-show-do” model, which gives patients the time and information they need to feel comfortable with a procedure.