Student Profiles: Meharry’s Mission Motivates and Inspires Students

For third-year dental student Bruno Kabuha, his acquaintance with dentistry began early—with his siblings. “In Africa, it’s different than in the United States,” Kabuha said. “There’s no dentist really that you go to. It wasn’t a common thing. Somebody in the family would be kind of appointed as the family dentist, so you say, so they would be responsible for pulling the teeth and that was my job. Whenever I was young I pulled my older sister’s teeth, my younger brother’s teeth.”

It was after coming to America that Kabuha, now from Pensacola, Florida, found dentistry could actually be a vocation.

For fourth-year dental student Le-titia Lyons, attending Meharry is an example of a life-changing opportunity that was extended to her. “When you think about the students that Meharry recruits, we don’t come from the backgrounds where there are doctors in our lineage,” she said. Originally from Newport News, Virginia, Lyons was recruited as an undergraduate to play basketball at Old Dominion University. “Most times, we’re either the first college graduate in the family—and definitely the first professional school graduate—and so we don’t necessarily have that support system that can say, ‘Hey, we’ll take care of all your bills.’ Cause it’s not happening,” she said. “I think that’s important because, again, it puts out there minority physicians who are equipped to provide great care.”

Adkins said that a fudging common to the overwhelming number of Meharry students is the desire to go back to their communities and give back. “I think that’s a very unique thing to Meharry. It’s not something that’s said, it’s something that’s understood.” As a result of the College’s mission to serve the underserved, many want to be physicians, dentists or other medical scientists find a home at Meharry they likely would not have found anywhere else.

Kelly Harris, Ph.D. candidate in the School of Graduate Studies and Research, said she encounters people frequently who have a kind of faith in what Meharry graduates bring to underserved communities, saying simply: “I know Meharry.”

Lynn said that the reputation of Meharry graduates often precedes them. “I think that Meharry is so important because we take everyone. And in addition to that, the care is not lacking—it’s actually excellent care.”

Coffie said those who choose to financially support Meharry are not only investing in future health care professionals, but in the lives of others, including the underserved.

“The thing that’s different is when Meharry takes a chance on a student...” said Adkins. “It’s taking a chance on somebody who maybe didn’t graduate samoa high school,” said Kristin Coffie, third-year medical student from Terry, Mississippi, “a chance on somebody who maybe they left school for a while but then decided to come back. But those are from the community that you need the most,” she said.

Adkins agreed. “Meharry is one of those unique places that actually looks at the total person instead of what they look like on paper...I think that’s totally awesome.”

Adkins said he wants to be clear about what it takes to become a doctor at Meharry. “I’m no different than any other 28-year-old man. I make mistakes. There’s nothing goofy or special about me at all,” he said. “That’s what I want people to know. That there isn’t something heavenly about becoming a doctor. That it’s just putting one foot in front of the other and doing a little bit everyday, and you can wake up and accomplish your dreams.”

For many Meharry students, the rewards of service begin to come early. Through the College’s student-run Meharry 12-South Community Clinic, future health care providers come in contact with patients who don’t have the resources to see quality oral and mental health care. “A lot of people, believe it or not, have not been exposed to how to properly brush their teeth, how to floss,” Kabuha said. “So, whenever we get the opportunity—regardless of how busy the day is—going down to that clinic and making that difference in someone’s mouth, it means a lot. You can see the joy expressed in their face, and that touches me.”

It reveals something about the students themselves, too, Kabuha said: “You can have an impact on the community regardless of how busy you are. “That’s what Meharry teaches you,” he said. “You can always spend your time on things you value. Meharry 12 South is something that definitely has a part of my heart.”

Because of that sense of mission among Meharry students and graduates, the College has become known for its nurturing environment, comprehensive training and dedication to service.