



GIVING BACK

A dermatologist in training, Ellen (Nikki) Pritchett, MD '11, initially had her heart in the field of public health. For her, this broad approach to medicine resonates at a personal level. She wants to help disadvantaged communities on a large scale. But her desire to care for people in a more intimate, immediate manner led her to medical school. Now a standout resident in the Drexel/Hahnemann dermatology program, Pritchett is pursuing both goals.

NIKKI PRITCHETT, MD

'11, Resident

By Catherine McCorkle

Growing up in New Castle, Delaware, Pritchett had always been interested in science. She was also influenced by two exemplary caregivers: her grandmother, Helen Pritchett, a stay-at-home wife and mother; and the family's primary care physician, whom she describes as amazing.

"What I admired most about our family doctor was his bedside manner and compassion," she says. "He often went beyond what was expected. For example, home visits weren't a regular part of his practice. However, when my grandfather became critically ill and was unable to make it to his office, the doctor visited him at home."

As Pritchett's education continued, she says, she became interested in the "behavioral and social components of health [in conjunction with] caring for disadvantaged communities." This was more than academic curiosity. "I come from an underserved community," she says, "so it stems from that." Pritchett is cognizant of the many opportunities her advanced degrees have provided. Hand-in-hand with pursuing her education was the inherent desire to give back to the community.

For Pritchett, the field of public health seemed like the best avenue to attain her goals. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in the biological basis of behavior, she began working at the Philadelphia Department of Public Health as a disease intervention specialist. In this hands-on role, she enjoyed the personal contact with patients. Pritchett soon went on to pursue her master of public health at Yale.

Armed with her new degree, Pritchett returned to Philadelphia's public health department, assuming various roles in the tuberculosis control program. Adept at her job, she was given more responsibilities: epidemiologist, program coordinator, director of training. But, Pritchett laughs, the more she was promoted through the ranks, the more she realized she didn't want to be distanced from her patients. She enjoyed her work, but she wanted to be more directly involved with those entrusted to her care.

Pritchett enrolled at Drexel University College of

Medicine in 2007. Soon she was leaning toward dermatology. Although medical students are not typically exposed much to dermatology, Pritchett explains that while working at the health department, she had a lot of exposure to skin manifestations of infectious diseases. Once she began her first dermatology rotation, she knew she had found her niche in medicine. The field is "what I could see myself doing," as she puts it. When she graduated, Pritchett received the award for Excellence in Dermatology.

Now in the second year of her dermatology residency, she appreciates both the breadth and depth of her field. "I enjoy dermatology because of the depth of the specialty — incorporating surgical procedures — and the opportunity to care for those of all ages," she explains. "Also, it has the potential to impact patients, because dermatologic conditions can have enormous psychosocial repercussions and adversely affect patients' quality of life. I like that you can actually see the disease process. You can see it resolve and how it progresses."

Throughout her adult life, Pritchett has been aware that her various degrees granted her privileges others may not enjoy, and she is gratified when she can use her education and skills in public service. For example, she was quick to travel to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. As a volunteer there with the American Red Cross, Pritchett served as an epidemiologist and helped coordinate care for those living in shelters.

During her residency, she has volunteered in an outreach program in which she mentors high school students from underserved communities who are interested in medical careers. The mentors also engage the students in activities such as visiting the Mütter Museum. Pritchett laments that she does not have as much time to devote to the group this year.

Ever grateful for her career and for the life she has been able to build for herself, Pritchett feels a tremendous responsibility to her family and to the larger community. "I feel like I've been given so many opportunities," she says. "I want to give back." That's exactly what she's doing.