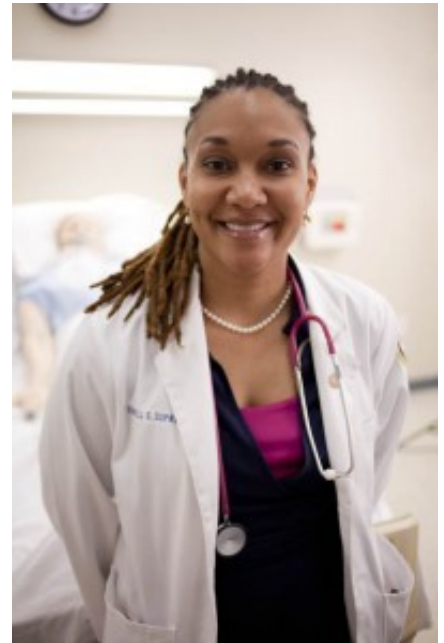




GRACE UNDER PRESSURE: Renell Dupree '13

Medical school applicants are often asked what challenges they had to overcome in their life up to that point. Few consider that question, however, once they are accepted and become students. For Drexel University College of Medicine second-year student Renell Dupree, her first year of medical school was supremely challenging and literally involved the extremes of life and death. Yet in learning to cope with these challenges, Dupree drew on her own inner strength as well as the incredible resources of the College. Her story is not hers alone, it belongs also to the tightly knit support system at the College of Medicine.

Dupree entered the College of Medicine in 2008, already an accomplished researcher and academic. She had come to Philadelphia in 2003 as a lab assistant for Dr. Janis Burkhardt, who was relocating from the University of Chicago to the University of Pennsylvania. Dupree had worked in Burkhardt's lab as a Chicago undergraduate and continued there as a post-bac. She knew she wanted a career in medicine, yet was unsure about whether to pursue a Ph.D. or a medical degree. Once she determined that she "always wanted to keep a hand in research, but at heart...wanted to see and work with patients," Drexel became her top choice.



Several weeks after starting at the College of Medicine, Dupree learned she and her husband were expecting their first child. Although excited about the news, Dupree struggled through first trimester fatigue and nausea while trying to maintain a busy academic schedule. Speaking of the faculty and staff, she says, "The support system is amazing," and she credits their flexibility with helping her through an exhausting semester.

In the middle of this busy but joyful time, Dupree's father, with whom she was very close, passed away. "As soon as I entered my second trimester and got into a groove with school and was doing better, I lost my Dad. That was huge for me." Her father had always been a peerless supporter of his daughter and a major reason Dupree decided to attend medical school. She says she always worried, "If anything ever happened to my father, I would not be able to live."

Dupree returned to Indiana to be with family and handle her father's funeral arrangements. As the oldest child, much of the organization and emotional support fell on her shoulders. "I had to be strong for them," she reveals. "It wasn't until I got back home to Philadelphia, after the funeral, that I was really able to grieve myself. Plus trying to keep up with all my classes. And being pregnant." Any one of these life challenges would be a lot for a person to handle – let

alone three simultaneously. Her advisor approached her about applying for the College's Extended Curriculum program, which "allows you to split either your first or your second year into two years." Dupree shrugged off the suggestion, telling herself, "I'm superwoman. I can do this."

"If it wasn't for my faith in God, I don't know how I would have gotten through [first year]," Dupree admits. She credits that faith as well as her incredibly loyal peers and the College's faculty and staff with enabling her to persevere during this difficult time. "I don't know what other schools are like, but...I don't know that I could have done what I did in a less supportive environment than what they provide at Drexel."

Dupree's daughter, Isabel Ruth, was born July 1. Medical school resumed in early August. She fully expected to resume her student lifestyle and routines, but baby Isabel had other ideas. Dupree laughs now, saying, "Babies come here with their own plan, and they don't always line up with what your plan is." She explains how she would nurse Isabel at home, go to class, rush back home during lunch to nurse, return to campus, then hurry home to nurse and study. It was a lot to juggle.

Under the weight of a demanding med school curriculum, new motherhood, and grieving the loss of her beloved father, Dupree felt she was unable to balance her course load with her complicated life. Something was always falling by the wayside. It was time to reevaluate the Extended Curriculum option. After discussing things with Dean Parrish, Dupree made the decision to pursue it. "That was the best decision that I ever made," she says in retrospect. "It speaks to the support and the options Drexel provides for us. I know at other medical schools, I would have just had to take a year off, then come back and finish my coursework. It was good to be able to have that balance and spend time with my daughter while she was young, but also to be able to stay in the mix of things...not to get totally out of the system and then have to get re-acclimated."

Dupree is now in the second half of her second year, delving into research once more. She will most likely be specializing in otolaryngology. She laughs, saying, "The only thing that can keep me from doing it at this point will be board scores."

While Dupree once considered a specialization in obstetrics other matters led her to re-evaluate. "My dad died from lymphoma. A year after he was diagnosed with cancer, my sister was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.... It was an ENT who took care of her and who did her surgery. Before that, I didn't even know the discipline of otolaryngology." An added benefit: The ENT lifestyle is more conducive to a family life.

In her first two years of medical school, Dupree has encountered incredible personal challenges. Yet, she insists, "I've had an amazing experience at Drexel." She's quick to credit her fellow students – as well as the faculty and staff – with providing "such a supportive environment." Reflecting on her overall experience, she says that medical school forced her to deal with stress in healthy ways. "Your success in medical school depends on learning to do that well."

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