

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES: WOMAN ONE

By Catherine McCorkle



I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.
Mother Teresa

The Woman One story is one of community, of the relationships and connections knitting the fabric of that community. It reveals how individuals are sustained and nurtured through their connections to community, and it illuminates how the community is strengthened, made resilient, by the tenacity of the individual threads. It is a story of interdependence.

The Woman One Award and Scholarship began with two ambitious goals: to annually honor a woman of exceptional leadership and to provide tuition support for underrepresented minority women at the College of Medicine. Founded in

2003 by Institute for Women's Health and Leadership Director Lynn Yeakel with support from Chancellor Emeritus D. Walter Cohen, DDS, the Woman One Award would honor a remarkable woman from the region, and the award ceremony would raise funds for the talented medical students who would be named Woman One Scholars.

As students, Woman One Scholars are connected with a vibrant network of academic and regional leaders, donors and supporters. As physicians, these alumnae, or emeritae, frequently work in understaffed medical fields and with underserved populations, further bolstering those communities.

College of Medicine faculty form the scholarship selection committee. As criteria, the scholars must already be accepted

Leslie Ann Miller, Esq. (center), the first woman president of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, was Woman One 2004. Annette Lopez (left) and Ronni Manuel were the first Woman One Scholars.





The Woman One Scholars in 2009: (l-r, front) Ifeoma Nwabuzor, Stephanie Johnson, Edwina Coleman, Veronica Ramirez; (back) Michelle Ballentyne, Ronni Manuel, Gisela Vargas, Janielle Hyde, Alicia Howard and Emilia Cuneo (missing: Keri Fugarolas).

into the College, and have demonstrated academic achievement, leadership, a commitment to community service and financial need. Additionally, Yeakel says, “the underlying consideration is a commitment to underserved communities.”

Many Woman One Scholars have also overcome enormous barriers to get to medical school, says Yeakel. “In some cases they’re the first in their families to even go to college, much less graduate school. Their stories are quite astonishing, and that’s a great example for young people — for everybody, really. It’s the image of what determination can do.”

What It Means to Be a Scholar

There have been 27 Woman One Scholars since 2003. For many students, the Woman One scholarship is the deciding factor in attending the College of Medicine; \$80,000 over four years is not insignificant.

Sharing their perspectives of Woman One are four emeritae: Annette Lopez, MD ’08, Emilia Cuneo, MD ’09, Alicia Howard, MD ’13, and Sharrón (Ronni) Manuel, MD, PhD ’13.

Woman One “sealed the deal” for Lopez to attend Drexel. The scholarship “was pretty shocking,” she says. “I had no expectation whatever.” Manuel was ready to attend another school when she learned of her selection. The scholarship “was a huge surprise, and it lifted a big financial burden as well.”

Manuel points out that there are very few scholarships for medicine. “A lot of people just have to take out loans and live off the loan money,” she explains. Cuneo says learning of the scholarship was “very exciting,” particularly because she was financing her education “all on [her] own.”

Although the scholarship’s financial impact should not be undervalued, the emeritae recognize that Woman One provides important support in other ways as well. Howard observes that, particularly at the start of her medical education, it was “good to be around a group of women moving through medical school. The ones that were ahead of me were helpful if I wanted to ask anything. That network was already established.”

Scholars also meet various donors at a summer or autumn gathering. At this event, Lopez realized “what it really meant to all of a sudden have this good chunk of the Philadelphia community behind you.” For a new medical student, this

community is invaluable. “First, it was a nice network of folks willing to help you and provide some support and structure,” she says. “It also gave you further encouragement to keep going with those activities that already got you there — especially in medical school where you start figuring out what priorities are.”

The Woman One Award

The cornerstone of Woman One is the annual award honoring a woman who has made a significant difference through leadership. Scholars attend the formal reception, where they meet the donors and that year’s awardee. The night is a celebration of Woman One’s accomplishments, and the scholars are honored as well.

“It’s amazing,” says Manuel. “You meet so many different people. It’s almost like you’re the star of the show besides the one that’s being honored for Woman One.” Guests meet the scholars after learning about their personal journeys. “It’s so encouraging. You remember why you went into medicine,” Manuel says. “It is your opportunity to say thanks to all your supporters.”

Aside from being an opportunity to express gratitude, the award ceremony is also personally motivating. Howard relates how wonderful it is to be part of an evening that recognizes an accomplished woman, frequently one balancing career and family. She says of the Woman One Award recipients over the years, “Regardless of what they were doing, they always had a huge connection with whatever local community they were in, so I thought that was inspiring.”

A Network of Interested People

Howard notes that it is not just the honoree who impresses the scholars. The scholarship donors themselves are similarly admirable. They “clearly had some interest and were definitely giving back to their local community in terms of helping us,” she explains. “I think that was also a bit inspirational as well.”

Manuel also touches on an important aspect of the donor community. “People didn’t know about Woman One [the scholarship], but they came because they were friends of Woman One [the awardee],” she explains. “Then they became new donors the following year.”

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The current Woman One scholars surround Dean Daniel V. Schidlow, MD; Woman One Director Lynn Yeakel, MSM; Woman One 2014 Laurada Byers, who founded the Russell Byers Charter School in Philadelphia; and Drexel President John Fry. The scholars are Nejat Naser, Christina Schroeder, Susan Ramirez-Chung, Amber Peterson, Christel Francois, Angela Bryant, Chinwe Ibeh, Cherish Page and Ingrid Schmiederer.

They become new donors because of the scholars. "It's their presence, their stories, their really amazing examples that strengthen the program and inspire the donors," observes Yeakel. "We've built a constituency of donors in the community who are not necessarily connected to Drexel in any way, but they have become interested in, and supportive of, this program."

With the visible support of so many behind them, the determination of the Woman One Scholars is enhanced. "It's nice to stand up and be acknowledged for the type of medicine we're planning on pursuing," Cuneo reveals. "I had always planned on going into some sort of primary care. Being part of the awards ceremony really lent gravitas to that decision — to be committed to working with an underserved community."

While the scholars attest to unforeseen benefits of the Woman One program in terms of the tremendous peer, collegiate and community support, Yeakel also sees benefits they had not predicted at the program's outset.

First, many emeritae remain in the region for their residencies and later careers. "That's a great plus for our region," Yeakel says. For instance, Lopez became chief resident in emergency medicine at Einstein Hospital, located in North Philadelphia. Four emeritae are currently in residency or fellowship programs in the Philadelphia area.

Support for Primary Care

A second "big picture" benefit is that the tuition support has enabled many students to enter primary care, a field traditionally lower-paying than other specialties. Yeakel notes that primary care and ob/gyn are "the fields in need of more physicians." Woman One emeritae entering these fields is "a benefit we're very proud of," she says.

Manuel is an obstetrics and gynecology resident at the University of Kentucky. Howard is an internal medicine resident at Yale/New Haven Hospital.

Cuneo is in family practice in Lynn, Massachusetts, an experience she describes as being "on the front lines. We need more primary care," she states. "We need more people taking care of those who don't have it, who don't have the resources a lot of us do." Although her schedule is busy, she is proud to help others, particularly since many of her patients are newly arrived in the United States. "I find it enormously satisfying that at the end of the day, I've taken care of people,

and know I've made a difference in their lives," she says.

For Cuneo, the commitment to underserved communities is personal. Her father passed away when she was young, and her mother worked as a maid. These experiences were "really formative in how I was planning to practice medicine," she says. She always wanted to work with underserved women, and "being a part of Woman One helped meld that decision. That was really the right thing for me."

Howard also speaks of a strong desire to practice medicine from a young age. "I had no idea at the time what it entailed, but I felt like [becoming a doctor] was something I really wanted to do, regardless of what it took to get there." Howard had been sick as a child, and she sees this as a "driving force" in her calling.

Lopez, now a toxicology fellow at Oregon Health & Science University, observes that many of the skills she honed as a Woman One Scholar have translated to what she currently does at the Oregon Poison Center. Her work there is directly related to community service and counseling; occasional PSAs and interviews are familiar territory.

The Ripple Effect

Yet perhaps the most important benefit of Woman One is the sense of what it means moving forward. At the individual level, emeritae are inclined to pass on what was freely given to them. Lopez conveys this sense of responsibility: "Having come from a somewhat disadvantaged area ... to have the opportunity to go to medical school and become a leader [motivates you] to tell kids from similar areas or backgrounds, 'Hey, I was able to get through it this way, and this is how you can do it.'"

On a broader level, Yeakel mentions the impact emeritae have on their communities. "When you think of the multiplier effect, the number of patients that they will serve over their lifetimes," she says, "we're talking about an enormous impact in terms of millions of people's lives over average 40-year careers."

The Woman One emeritae have been called amazing, astonishing and determined. Their stories inspire the Philadelphia community to offer them continued support. Many have not only surmounted personal challenges, they have thrived in rigorous academic and professional settings. Rather than draw attention to this journey, however, many emeritae simply want to be called "doctor."