

URBAN MEDICINE PROGRAM

Class of 2023 Student Newsletter



Pictured: UMed Class of 2019

A NOTE TO THE CLASS OF 2023

Welcome to the Urban Medicine Program (UMed) family. We are proud of your commitment to our goals, and excited that you chose to enrich your medical studies by addressing the issues that continue to create inequities for individuals and communities living in urban areas. UMed is a unique program that integrates educational activities, designed specifically for you, with the regular medical school curriculum. Our mission is "To prepare physician leaders to serve underserved urban communities." Your background and achievements to date demonstrate an understanding of the issues that contribute to health disparities in urban settings and the desire to become such a physician. We look forward to working, learning, and growing with you!

-UMed Faculty and Staff



Joanna Michel, PhD

She/her
Director



Jorge Girotti, PhD, MHA

UMed Founder &
Faculty Affiliate



Nikki Waltrich, MPH

She/her
Program Coordinator

UMED CURRICULAR THEMES

Disparities in Healthcare Access & Outcomes

Policy & Advocacy

Diversity & Intercultural Communications

Community-Based Participatory Research



Willow Springs, IL
BA, English, BS,
Environmental Science
(Major), Creative Writing
& Polish Studies (Minors),
Loyola University Chicago
MS, Medical Physiology,
University of IL in Chicago

ALEXANDRA (OLA) BACZYNSKI (SHE/HER)

Ola is interested in the intersection between environmental externalities and the health of communities. After completing her bachelors degree, she volunteered in a clinic in rural Jamaica, where she was able to witness first hand how pollutants are often borne disproportionately by lower income people, and how these hazards manifest as patient ailments. Although the days in the blistering Jamaican sun were challenging, those experiences inspired her to pursue a career in medicine. Upon returning home, she wanted to continue supporting individuals who lack access to healthcare. She began working as a Polish interpreter at CommunityHealth, assisting with communication between patients and providers. The clinic is a place where even the most vulnerable are supported, and she is incredibly honored to volunteer there. As someone who has always felt a commitment to care for the underserved, the UMed program offers a unique opportunity to continue being involved with these communities and to collaborate with like-minded future physicians. Outside of the medical sphere, Ola enjoys watching cooking shows and baking with her mom. Ola is also a runner, animal lover, and travel buff. She has also read David Copperfield four times and often cries during both sad and happy movies.



West Chicago, IL
BA, Biochemistry &
American Culture Studies,
Washington University in
St. Louis

YASH ANAND BHATIA (HE/HIM)

After spending the past six years in St. Louis, Yash is excited to come home to Chicago and continue living, working, and studying in an urban center. While a student at Washington University in St. Louis, Yash enjoyed investigating the biochemical foundations of medicine as well as the ethical and sociological ramifications of societal injustice. Attending medical school will allow Yash to continue learning at this intersection and, more importantly, apply new-found knowledge to patient care. After serving at a poorly funded, understaffed high school as an AmeriCorps College Adviser with the College Advising Corps for the past two years, Yash further realized the importance of upstream programming and legislative action in making sustainable improvements to American society. Enter the UMed Program, designed to support medical students in becoming policymakers and community activists who practice patient-centered medicine. Yash is thus keen to join this program and begin working with like-minded peers, inspiring professors, and wonderful community partners. In his free time, Yash enjoys walking through parks and neighborhoods, watching shows like Fleabag and Patriot Act, and reading creative non-fiction and political philosophy.



Chicago, IL
BA, Biochemistry (Major),
Women, Gender, &
Sexuality Studies (Minor),
Washington University in
St. Louis

ZITA TSZYAN CHAN (SHE/HER)

Zita was born in Hong Kong and raised in Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood, where her parents and dog still reside. After graduating from Whitney M. Young Magnet High School just a few blocks from UIC, she headed south to Washington University in St. Louis to pursue studies in Biochemistry and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She returned to Chicago for her gap year, primarily scribing and translating Cantonese in a primary care office and volunteering at Sarah's Circle, an organization for homeless and at-risk women. Her combined experiences in the past few years culminated in a desire to advocate for individuals and the surrounding community. She is so excited to be part of UMed and can't wait to meet her classmates, preferably over lots of coffee. Her other interests include biking, DIY projects, baking (mostly consuming said baked goods), and sustainability initiatives.



Algonquin, IL
BA, Public Health
Studies, Johns Hopkins
University
MPH, Dartmouth College

NIRALI CHAUHAN

Nirali is from the northwest suburbs of Chicago and is very excited to be the first physician in her family. Born to immigrants, Nirali frequently visited her parents' childhood homes in India and became attuned to health disparities at a young age. During her undergraduate studies at Johns Hopkins University, she became passionate about health equity, working with organizations like United Way and local HIV clinics. Through this work, Nirali began to realize the importance of advocating for marginalized populations and fostering stakeholder engagement in addressing health challenges. Recognizing the relationship between community and individual health, Nirali pursued a master's in public health at Dartmouth College. During her graduate studies, she interned with Cook County Department of Public Health, using her epidemiology skills to help tackle childhood lead exposure in the county. Outside of academics and community work, Nirali is a certified meditation teacher, enjoys bookbinding, and loves to share homemade treats. She is very excited to continue to serve the community she grew up in by bridging her public health and medical education through the UMed program.



Chicago, IL
BS, Biology, University of
Illinois at Chicago

AMY BIBIANA DE LA TORRE

Amy attended the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy for high school and then studied as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). She graduated from UIC in May 2019 as a Guaranteed Professional Program Admission (GPPA) Medicine, Honors College student. Amy has remained engaged in her community through working and teaching as an Emergency Medical Technician where she gained tremendous insight and experiences which continuously reinforced her commitment to serving as a healthcare provider. Although rewarding, her work with emergency medicine served as a constant reminder of the overt language barrier preventing non-English speaking patients from receiving proper health care and advice. This exposure, in addition to her family's own experiences in the healthcare non-system, led to her deeper interests in serving minority populations in underserved, urban communities as a member of the UMed family. Aside from school and work, Amy spends her time at the gym, watching scary movies, going for walks with her dogs, and enjoying eating a lot (of sushi) with her friends and family.



Chicago, IL
BA, English Honors,
Loyola University
BA, Biomedical Sciences,
Lewis University

SERGIO GONZALEZ

Sergio worked in microbiology/molecular biology research before attending medical school. His experience in biology led him to pursue medicine and his interest in the intersectionality of science and the humanities through the art of storytelling--and connecting people's stories-- has given him a lifelong pursuit for understanding how scientific discovery is only possible through connectivity, and the same can be said of the human experience. He first became interested in UMed when he started volunteering as an interpreter at one of the partner sites, CommunityHealth. As a first-generation college student, he understands the importance of language as a fundamental contributor to the relationship between social strata and health. He strives for the continued growth of his role from volunteer interpreter, to student doctor volunteer, to one day being a physician that serves as an advocate and voice for those in need of medical care. In his free time, he loves to garden, read, go to coffee shops, and explore the city.



Miramar, FL
BS, Health Education,
University of Florida

TANYA HENRY

Tanya attended the University of Florida and graduated in May 2013 with a Bachelor of Science in Health Education. It was at this institution where her fuel to become a doctor ignited as she worked with student run clinics and learned how the lack of patient education affected healthcare, especially vulnerable populations. After the completion of her undergraduate degree, she worked as a patient registrar at Broward Health Medical Center where she got the wonderful opportunity to work with the homeless and immigrant population. Upon working here, Tanya realized her interest for urban medicine as she was exposed to various factors that affect patient care, namely the importance of access to nutritious food and the link between social services and healthcare. With interest in this area of medicine, Tanya not only knew she wanted to work with this population, but also with other underserved groups. As an immigrant herself, she would like to become an advocate to meet the needs and address the health disparities facing those of the underserved populations; hence, are the motivating reasons which led her to apply to the UMed program. In her spare time, Tanya enjoys cooking, baking and playing soccer.



Woodridge, IL
BS, Biology, Loyola
University

RENIELL (RENI) XAVIER INIGUEZ

Reniell is a first-generation college student who studied biology at College of DuPage and Loyola University of Chicago. He decided to pursue medicine because of the field's intimate connection with science and people. The fact that medicine requires one to constantly adapt and innovate was also another driving factor. Reniell is specifically drawn to the UMed program because he seeks to learn how he can work with other professionals to help alleviate healthcare disparities in urban populations. He is especially motivated to positively impact the Hispanic community that does not have access to affordable healthcare; as his mother was part of this population for a long time. Reniell currently works as a microbiologist at a food testing laboratory where he enjoys running side investigations with his colleagues. His passion outside of work and school is weightlifting and drawing. In addition, he used to be a very avid skateboarder when he was younger and continues to ride around in his free time.



Peoria, IL
BS, Biology, University of
Illinois at Chicago

ANNA LIU (SHE/HER)

Anna was born and raised in Peoria, IL. She underwent the public school system, developing an interest in public service and creating equitable opportunities. Anna attended UIC and earned a BS in Biological Sciences. After graduating, Anna studied the role of connexins in the development of peripheral neuropathies at the UIC College of Medicine's Abrams lab. Anna decided to pursue medicine at a young age while visiting and observing her grandfather treat three generations of patients in Taiwan. Volunteering in hospitals, shadowing, and attending medical camps confirmed her goals of becoming a physician. During college, Anna was involved in Peer Health Exchange and was the co-founder of UIC Kids Are Scientists, Too. Through these programs, she was able to teach underserved high school freshmen health education, coordinate and create science curriculum for elementary and middle school students, and learn about many social injustices minority groups face. These experiences led Anna to join UMed. She wants to make healthcare more accessible, reduce mental health stigmas, and encourage young people to lead healthy lifestyles. Anna is an avid ballet dancer, violist, pianist, and tennis player. She loves traveling around the world to explore cultures and admire architecture.



Peoria, IL
BA, Cognitive Neuroscience
(Major), African & African
American Studies (Minor),
Washington University in St.
Louis

JADA MCDONALD (SHE/HER)

Jada McDonald studied cognitive neuroscience and black studies at Washington University in St. Louis. As an undergraduate, she worked as a civic agent within the St. Louis community. She spent two years interning at a non-profit community-based agency to develop interventions that addressed minority health disparities. She also collaborated with physicians and community partners to hold health forums for St. Louis residents. Ms. McDonald recently completed a service year with the National Health Corps program in Chicago. In her role as an asthma educator, she delivered school-based asthma management classes to over 1,000 black and Latino students, caregivers, and school staff across 50 Chicago Public Schools. Spending the last year providing health education, she learned about the unique health crises that the Chicago environment presents to low-income, minority populations. Ms. McDonald plans to continue her role as a lifelong learner in UMed to better understand how to care for Chicagoans in need. In her free time, Ms. McDonald likes to go to rap concerts, try new recipes in the kitchen, hit the gym, and listen to her favorite podcasts.



Elgin, IL
BS, Biological Sciences
(Major), Mathematics
(Minor), University of Illinois
at Chicago

MONICA NAVA FRENIER

Monica graduated with her bachelor's degree of Biological Sciences and a minor in Mathematics from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her academic interests include learning about the human body and discussing theoretical math problems. Although Monica believes that it was a combination of different life experiences that has led her to medical school, the most recent and eye-opening experience was a medical mission trip to Peru. During this, Monica provided wellness checks, medical supplies and medications to surrounding impoverished communities. Monica observed how the physicians interacted, treated and provided for their patients regardless of socioeconomic status. This made her confident that this was the type of physician she wanted to be. Having worked six years as a certified pharmacy technician, this has made Monica a zealous advocate for those in underserved populations. She witnessed patients leaving without necessary medication due to cost. Most of these populations were those that did not qualify for Medicaid such as immigrants or the working poor. Monica's views of holistic medicine have been shaped by these moments. UMed will help guide these fundamental discussions of change while surrounding her with like-minded individuals that are as passionate in addressing health inequity as she is. Monica enjoys reading, painting and spending time with family and her three cats.



Aurora, IL
BS, Bioengineering,
University of Illinois at
Chicago

JULIAN PACHECO

Julian Pacheco was born in Chicago, IL, raised in Aurora, IL, and studied bioengineering at the University of Illinois at Chicago. By studying bioengineering, he was able to get a better idea of how technology and medicine can be used in conjunction to advance healthcare. Returning to the city for undergraduate studies and participating in the Chicago Cancer Health Equity Collaborative opened his eyes to the prevalence of health disparities in Chicago. Hearing first-hand accounts of the struggles that certain groups undergo combined with his knowledge of these events from both his Puerto Rican and Filipino family drew him to the UMed program. He is very excited to be participating in the program and when he's not studying you can find him taking photos around the city or playing soccer with friends.



Darien, IL
BS, Biological Sciences,
University of Illinois at
Chicago

GABRIELLE PEREZ

Born and raised in the Chicagoland area, Gabrielle has always been aware of the irony surrounding Chicago: home to renowned hospitals and at the same time, some of the largest health disparities in the country. After working as an assistant teacher at McGaw YMCA, Gabrielle saw first-hand these disparities disadvantaged families face. This opened her eyes to new perspectives surrounding the medical field, and influenced her to want to work with UMed while attending UICOM in particular. Her experience as a CNA solidified her desire to continue her path to medical school. Her most memorable resident, with tears in his eyes, told her "I hope I'm here to see you graduate. You'll be a great doctor." Eager to develop more of a leadership role, she believes being a doctor will fulfill this, and will allow her to be a voice for her patients and community. Gabrielle is a faithful Chicago Bears fan and loves spending time with her new pitbull rescue, Jax.



Chicago, IL
BA, French & Francophone
Studies, Davidson College

STEPHANIE PINEDA (SHE/HER)

Stephanie has always loved science and language, and decided at a young age that she wanted to become a doctor and would do anything to do so. There were no doctors in her family; rather it was her experiences with her own pediatricians that piqued her interest in medicine. In high school, she began studying French and loved it enough to obtain a B.A. in French and Francophone Studies from Davidson College in 2014. All the while, she pursued her interests in medicine by working in a research lab at the University of Chicago for two summers during high school, pursuing a pre-medical concentration at Davidson, and working at UIC's Latino Health Science Enrichment Program for three summers during college. The work she did with LaHSEP inspired her interest in urban medicine. This program showed her that even in affluent urban settings, healthcare and education disparities are real issues, and she vowed that when she went into medicine she would work toward closing those gaps in whatever way she could. In her spare time, Stephanie likes to spend time with her dogs, cook, read, and occasionally indulges in amateur photography.



Miami, FL
BS, Biology, Stetson
University
MS, Drexel University

JUAN POLANCO

Juan was born in Ecuador and at the age of five emigrated to Miami, Florida with his parents and brother. Growing up in underserved communities of South Florida, Juan witnessed firsthand the challenges of assimilating to a new culture, which laid the foundation for his interest in participating in UMed. During his time at Stetson University, Juan studied biology while playing with the collegiate Men's Soccer team. After receiving his B.S., Juan then worked for a year as an Emergency Room Medical Scribe in Palmetto General Hospital in Miami, where he saw, firsthand, the needs of the Latino population and was called to serve communities in need of greater access to care. His commitment to serve involved him in various community engagement activities during his master's degree program at Drexel University, where he was heavily invested in helping the underserved communities of Philadelphia. Through these experiences, Juan is motivated to join the UMed Class of 2023 and pursue a career in medicine at UICOM with the goal of reducing health disparities in lower socioeconomic communities. In his spare time, Juan likes to go to concert events, stay active by going to the gym, and explore the City of Chicago.



Burbank, IL
BS, Neuroscience, University of Illinois at Chicago

JILLIAN SACHEN

Jillian grew up in Burbank, IL. She graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago with a Bachelor of Science in Neuroscience and was part of the university's inaugural group of President's Award Program Honors scholars. With this full-ride scholarship, Jillian was able to become a first-generation college graduate and is passionate about getting more first-generation students through college and into graduate school. Upon completion of her degree, Jillian worked third-shift as an emergency room technician at St. Anthony Hospital on Chicago's West Side. The unique experience of an urban emergency room inspired her to attend medical school in an attempt to one day return to the West Side as a physician. She is excited about being surrounded by other individuals interested in the importance of intersectionality in medicine and looks forward to new friends from UMed. Together we can be the advocates our communities deserve and usher in a new face of medicine. When she isn't advocating for a medical revolution, Jillian enjoys good coffee and good company.



Blue Mound, IL
BS, Biology (Major), Chemistry & Spanish (Minors), University of Illinois at Chicago
MPH, Health Policy & Administration, University of Illinois at Chicago

ZOIE CLARISE SHEETS (SHE/HER)

Zoie moved to Chicago from small-town Illinois to pursue her education at UIC. Through her undergraduate years, she had the opportunity to teach health education in Chicago Public Schools, co-launch a meal for folks experiencing homelessness, and advocate for UIC becoming a more accessible university. These experiences sparked her interest in public health, leading her to pursue an MPH before medical school. Her personal experiences with disability fuel much of her interests, and she focuses much of her work on how to make health professionals more aware of disability culture and identity. Zoie believes deeply that a physician's responsibility is to understand the myriad of factors that impact their patients and how they can advocate for structural changes to increase opportunities for health, leading her both to the UMed Program at UIC and to join the board of Chicago Street Medicine.



Seattle, WA
BA, Applied Human Biology, Seattle Pacific University
MS, Immunology, King's College London

TAJANNA STINN (SHE/HER)

After graduating with her Bachelor of Science from Seattle Pacific University, Tajanna left her home of the Pacific Northwest and moved to London, UK to study immunology. While she already had a strong interest in medicine, experiencing a different healthcare system abroad encouraged her to reflect more deeply on the healthcare needs and inequalities in urban environments in the United States. Over the course of four years working in infectious disease research, her interest in addressing disparities in health grew into a passion that drew her to the Urban Medicine Program at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Outside of work, Tajanna enjoys DJing, reading graphic novels and cooking.



Oak Park, IL

**BS, Neuroscience, University
of Illinois at Chicago**

MARIA (GABBY) VALLE COTO (SHE/HER/ELLA)

Maria is originally from El Salvador but has been living in the suburbs of Chicago since 2005. She graduated from UIC in 2018 with a Bachelor's of Science in Neuroscience. Having experienced many difficulties accessing health care in her home country, and then later in the United States as an immigrant, Maria developed a passion for accessible health care and equity. The many compassionate health care providers that Maria interacted with as a teenager sparked her interest in providing care. Maria worked as an organizer with Planned Parenthood during her undergraduate years and her gap year, and as a researcher and volunteer with the UI Health Pilsen food pantry, and it was the experiences in these roles that helped her see and value the strength of collaborative partnerships. In these two roles she made partnerships in the city of Chicago that led her to work in health holistically, by addressing issues of menstrual equity, immigration, mental health, food insecurity, and homelessness. She hopes to continue this holistic health care approach by working within UMed and partnering further with Chicago-based organizations. Maria loves hiking, cooking, baking, and salsa dancing.



Harvey, IL

**BS, Biomolecular Science,
University of Michigan
MS, Physiology, Georgetown
University**

JEREMIAH J. WHITTINGTON

Jeremiah was born in Chicago, but spent the majority of his childhood in Harvey, IL. Growing up in an educationally disadvantaged community, Jeremiah realized the role that representation and mentorship played in increasing minority enrollment in medical school. In fact, he created a vlog/blog series titled "So You Want To Be A Doctor," to increase the number of underrepresented minorities entering the health profession by providing study techniques and unique perspectives on the medical school admissions process. As a graduate of the University of Michigan and Georgetown University, Jeremiah uses his educational experiences to inspire students from his community to excel in higher education. He takes great pride in speaking to students about his college experience. In particular, he stresses the importance of seeking out mentors, and using their career paths as a roadmap to make intentional decisions regarding their educational and professional journey. As an aspiring physician, his goal is to make sure that every student has equal opportunity to education, regardless of their zipcode. Away from studying, Jeremiah enjoys cooking with his lovely fiancée, and taking long walks with his miniature goldendoodle, Oliver.