

I was eleven years old when I met my maternal grandmother for the first time. I had heard stories about her battles with mental illness and substance abuse, so I formed vivid visual pictures about what she was like. I did not know what schizophrenia meant or even how to spell it. All I knew was that people considered my grandmother to be “special” and that she needed “help”. After meeting her, I saw someone completely different; I saw a light. I saw someone with unrealized potential and knew with the right tools she could lead a happy, fulfilling life. My grandmother experienced many episodes of delusions and hallucinations, and often the police were called to my house. During these times, I dreamed of ways I could reach her, ways I could help her. These feelings of intrigue and compassion remained with me throughout my adolescent years, and drove my desire to enroll in an AP Psychology course while a senior in high school. I was enthralled with the course and eager to learn everything I could about the human brain.

As I matriculated into college as a Biology major, I reached a crossroads: how could I practice within the mental health field and still be a physician? While contemplating how to address my dueling passions, I discovered psychiatry. It was a perfect solution! I could follow my lifelong dream of becoming a doctor, all while helping individuals like my grandmother. It was not just the field of psychiatry that lured me, it was the demand for physicians that look like me, specifically African-American women. My dream is to work to de-stigmatize mental illness in the African-American community, particularly among those with lower socio-economic status. I am even more driven to bridge the gap between these populations and the health care system after witnessing my grandmother deny life-saving treatment for cancer simply because she does not trust the prescribed medical procedures. If I can be a beacon of hope, a compassionate, knowledgeable and culturally-aware psychiatrist who is able to treat the human and not the condition. I will be the change that is needed in my community.

The American Psychiatric Association’s Medical Student Summer Mentoring Program offers a unique experience to work with this underserved population – a population that is disproportionately impacted by mental illness. Particularly, I am interested in obtaining experience within a clinical setting where I can obtain a first-hand account of what it means to serve this population as a mental health professional. Having worked in both an in-patient mental health institution and a community-based mental health clinic, I have garnered diverse experiences working with individuals much like my grandmother, and patients I hope to one day treat. Being able to enhance these skills and experiences under the mentorship of a psychiatrist sharing the same interests, will help to strengthen my interests and abilities as a future psychiatrist.