

## **Study Abroad Experience Convinced Alumna that a Career in Medicine was her Destiny**

*Alumna Brenda Arthur '17 did not grow up planning to be a doctor like her dad. The long hours he worked and time he spent away from family "really turned me off," said Arthur, a Teaneck, N.J., native. However, her experience during a Study Abroad trip to Costa Rica convinced her that medicine was indeed the path she was meant to pursue.*

*Arthur is a doctor of Emergency Medicine at Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia. While at Ramapo, she earned a B.S. in Biology, with a minor in Creative Writing and a Business Essentials certificate, and also was an accomplished member of the Ramapo Women's Swim Team.*

### **What ultimately made you decide to go into medicine?**

My father is a physician and growing up, I watched him work crazy hours. He does primary care as well as emergency medicine shifts; so essentially, he works two full-time jobs. (Not sure how!) Seeing firsthand the large number of hours that he worked, and time he spent away from family, really turned me off to the field of medicine early on.

It is interesting though, because I have always been fascinated by science and the human body in general. I knew I would be in a STEM field; I just was not sure which one when I started my time at Ramapo.

My view on medicine shifted when I was doing a summer Study Abroad program in Costa Rica. This trip was a large transition point in my life, as it is for most students who do some sort of exchange or study abroad program. This trip offered me a lot of time away from my friends and family to reflect on the things I wanted out of life, and really become grounded in nature and subsequently myself. Costa Rica is cool, for many reasons, but, relevant to this question, because they have a public healthcare system. I remember on one of my first days in the country, I rode a bus past El Hospital San Juan de Dios, one of San José's public hospitals. There was a massive line of patients outside, calmly waiting to be seen. The line stretched for multiple city blocks. I think seeing that and recognizing some differences between public and private healthcare systems really made me curious about the field of medicine, and healthcare in general.

When I came back to the U.S., this newly found interest allowed me to explore medicine from a different lens than what I knew growing up. I learned that as a physician you are a healer, a lifelong learner, a teacher, a researcher, an advocate, an important part of social and health policy, and so much more, all in one career. There are so many paths you can take, and it is truly the most exciting and versatile job that I know of. I truly am grateful that I found my way here.

### **Emergency medicine normally moves at a non-stop pace...what was the ER like during the pandemic?**

Being a brand-new physician, I started actually being able to introduce myself as a *doctor* in May 2021, and I did not start seeing patients as a doctor until July of the same year. So, the pandemic had already been going on and evolving when I entered the hospital system as a physician. For me, especially during this last omicron spike, I saw what Covid was doing to our healthcare system, and it still terrifies me.

The emergency department is a unique place because our doors are open 24/7 to all patients. We see everybody from patients that are having a cardiac arrest or victims of intense trauma, to patients with chronic back or toe pain that they finally decided to get checked out, or patients with housing insecurity, substance use or no access to healthcare. We have so many ranges of acuity and social issues that we care for in the emergency department, and that aspect makes it the most fascinating and fast-paced place in the hospital to practice medicine.

The pandemic was weird because it put us at a standstill, but ambulances were still bringing really sick patients to our door. Some days there were more than 60 people in our waiting room. The longest wait time that I personally saw was over eighteen hours. That is EIGHTEEN HOURS that someone is sitting in a hard waiting room chair to be evaluated by a physician. We lost patients in the waiting room, or in the department waiting for a hospital bed. Almost every person who stepped foot in the department who was tested for Covid popped up positive. I had just come off an intensive care unit (ICU) month before the spike and it was truly disturbing to see so much Covid and know that people could end up with destroyed lungs, or totally fine and just not having access to healthcare at all because our waiting room, department and hospital were bursting at the seams.

Thankfully, our administration adjusted and that only lasted a few weeks, but the sheer volume of patients was overwhelming for me to experience as an individual and is in no way sustainable for the U.S. hospital systems. Chaos.

**You were captain of the Women's Swim Team when you were at Ramapo. Do you still get into the pool?**

This is an easy question – no.

Swimming was a large part of my life for more than 15 years. I swam my last race in college and gave it absolutely everything. After leaving our championship meet, I was so satisfied with my swimming career and knew that was the end of that chapter in my life. I was nowhere near the level of national swimming or Olympics like some collegiate athletes. I was also starting medical school a few months later. For the first few years in medical school, I taught swim lessons; that was the closest I got to swimming. I have not made time in my chaotic schedule since then to get back in the pool, even for leisurely swimming, mainly because, while swimming is a beautiful sport, it is mentally draining and the chlorine in pools quite literally sucks moisture out of your entire body. I think I still need a couple more years of rejuvenation—maybe in 10 years or so I will have a different answer for you.

I have picked up yoga as a Covid hobby.

**You minored in creative writing. Tell us why.**

I have always loved reading and writing. (Former Ramapo Professor) Peter Scheckner taught one of my general education English classes that I took my first semester. I will always remember that course because it was a whole semester of critically thinking and discussing social issues that we explored through literature. There was a point where I wanted to become an English teacher myself -- that was how motivating this course was for me.

I started the creative writing minor because I wanted to take more classes that focused on critically thinking and vocalizing your thoughts about the world, to balance out the rote memorization that comes with science courses. I was toying

with the idea of exploring another major for a while as well, but I would say I mainly started this minor because I simply enjoyed the courses.

### **What advice can you offer Ramapo students who are considering a career in medicine?**

This is a loaded question. Everybody will tell you something different. I find it is best to take pieces of advice that resonate with you. Here are a few things that may change as I get much further into my career:

1. Be sure that medicine is what you, deep down in your soul, want to pursue. The road is long, and you will work harder than you have ever worked and sacrifice a lot of time and finances to be the best physician you can be for your future patients. The path is a lot easier when you have your own passion and a self-motivation to continue.
2. Every connection matters. In medicine, like most fields, being nice to people can get you so far. Keep in contact, not only with physicians, nurses, and other medical professionals, but also people in your professional life. Everyone knows someone in medicine that can possibly help you throughout your long training period. Networking and taking advantage of opportunities that make you a well-rounded professional can only help you. Speaking to different people about their experiences in medicine and outside of medicine can also help with your decision to go into this field – going back to my first point.
3. There are so many social issues that you will become hyperaware of once you enter the field of medicine. It can be frustrating and weigh on you as you are trying to learn the science of medicine. Remember that social awareness is just as important as medical knowledge. As future medical personnel, you are in a position of privilege and will have a new responsibility to do good.
4. Take time to appreciate the fascinating things you are learning about and the honor that comes with being able to take care of another human. You truly are about to enter the coolest field; never forget that.