

Personal health issue shaped the career course for alumnus

When he was in grade school, PJ Pimpinelli wanted to be a meteorologist. But a personal health issue changed that plan. So, from what could have been a negative event, he found a positive and dove into a highly competitive and intense field of healthcare, enrolling in the 3+3 program between Ramapo and UMDNJ/Rutgers for Biology/Physician Assistant Studies.

The North Arlington, N.J., native earned his degree in 2012 and is now a successful physician assistant in the department of pediatric endocrinology for the Atlantic Health System. He is primarily based out of Morristown, N.J., but sees patients in the outpatient setting in several locations.

What happened to alter your career plans?

If you asked me what I wanted to be back in elementary school, I would have told you a meteorologist. I used to pass out at the sight of blood and I never would have seen myself working in healthcare at that time. But at the age of thirteen, I was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes so I had to get over my fear of blood and needles rather quickly. After my diagnosis I knew I wanted to work in healthcare in some capacity but I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. It wasn't until my junior year of high school when my guidance counselor met with me to discuss future career goals when I even learned of the term "physician assistant." When I looked into what the role of a physician assistant was, I decided that it was a career that I was interested in moving forward with.

Pediatric endocrinology is very specialized and can be quite challenging. Tell us about what you're doing.

I work with a team of physicians and see patients for a variety of endocrine disorders including diabetes, growth, puberty, thyroid, and adrenal issues (to name a few). I spend a good portion of my time seeing patients in the clinic and the rest of my time is spent doing a fair amount of administrative work for my patients. Prior to working in pediatric endocrinology, I worked for over four years in general pediatrics and before that almost two years in family medicine.

How did your studies at Ramapo prepare you for this career?

Because I was in a 3+3 program, I had to fulfill all of the biology major requirements in three years. This meant that I was taking two lab science courses each semester. I felt like I had a demanding/challenging schedule each semester that really helped me with my study habits. When I transitioned to PA (physician assistant) school, I felt prepared and was able to keep using those skills and habits to help me succeed.

Do you have any special memories of being a Ramapo student?

I lived on campus and loved every minute of my time at Ramapo. I have so many positive memories. I made lifelong friends who I keep in touch with regularly. I took full advantage of the bus trips that were always planned by the Student Center office. Some of my favorite memories from class came from (biology lab coordinator) Dr. Petro's biology lectures, where she would sing catchy tunes and have plenty of hands-on demonstrations which helped me remember the material with a special touch.

What advice can you offer for students who plan to pursue this or a similar career path?

Stay determined and stay focused. The physician assistant profession is wonderful and although the schooling may be tough, the final endpoint is great. There is so much flexibility in what you can do as a PA, and the work-life balance that I have is something that I never want to lose.