Meet the 2020 RIPLS Scholars

Abby Catherman - School of Pharmacy
Abby grew up in a small, rural community in central Pennsylvania. She had the pleasure of attending Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania where she had the opportunity to explore social determinants of health and health disparities with a group of motivated individuals through classwork and volunteering experiences. Abby moved to a small town just outside of Asheville in 2015 where she began exploring potential career options in the field of pharmacy. Now a pharmacy student at UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy, Abby takes her classes on the Asheville campus where she is part of their Rural Scholars Program where emphasis is placed on community service, understanding social determinants of health that affect patient populations, and how working in interdisciplinary teams can make a positive impact in rural communities. In her free time, Abby enjoys spending time hiking or binge-watching Netflix with her two Shih Tzu pups, Oliver and Ava Jean, and her husband, Brad. Abby hopes to pursue an ambulatory care residency program upon graduation with the end goal of practicing in rural Western North Carolina.

Jaizynn Jones - School of Social Work
Jaizynn was raised in Raleigh, NC. She is a Social Work distance education graduate student. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice with a minor in Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her interests involve ensuring that youth and families, especially marginalized groups and individuals who live in rural counties, get connected with the proper community and health resources needed to live healthy and sustainable lives. Her education and career goals have always focused on community and sustainability. Jaizynn has worked in the non-profit sector for over four years and has extensive experience in evidence-based curriculum intervention and program implementation, predominantly within rural communities. Jaizynn works closely with the UNC School of Medicine Tobacco Treatment and Weight Management program on an interdisciplinary team. Through her involvement, she has contributed to evidence-based research on pharmacotherapy, population-based issues, and targeted skills in tobacco dependence counseling as she has been a part of the Duke-UNC Tobacco Treatment Specialist Training Program. Additionally, she is involved with the Student Health Action Coalition and Get Covered Carolina, which are student-led health organizations geared towards assisting individuals and families with free healthcare services and medical coverage resources for the uninsured and underinsured. Jaizynn plans to contribute to society by providing services within allied healthcare to address the social determinants of health.

Marjorie McVay - School of Public Health
Marjorie McVay was born and raised in Matthews, NC and is currently pursuing an MPH in Maternal & Child Health. She graduated from the University of South Carolina magna cum laude in 2015 with a B.A. in International Studies. As an undergraduate, Marjorie fell in love with public health through Changing Carolina, a health education program dedicated to improving physical, mental, and social health across the campus, community, and state. After graduating, Marjorie joined the Strategic Planning and Development team at Atrium Health in Charlotte, NC. In this role, Marjorie worked with an interdisciplinary team to determine gaps in healthcare coverage and identify strategic opportunities for future development. Marjorie is passionate about sustaining and expanding critical resources to rural parts of the state and is particularly interested in improving health outcomes for women in underserved communities. In her free time, Marjorie enjoys cooking and baking and has been working her way through her grandmother’s cookbook.

Ester Neumark - School of Nursing
Ester grew up in the foothills of western North Carolina and moved to Chapel Hill for her undergraduate studies, where she majored in Nursing and History. After graduating from the School of Nursing in 2017, Ester worked as a registered nurse at UNC Women’s Hospital, where she developed a growing interest in disease prevention and health promotion. Ester decided to continue her Tar Heel journey and return to UNC to study as a family nurse practitioner. She is also continuing her exploration of the area’s trails and State Parks, and loves to spend her free time outside, walking, hiking, and kayaking.

Aisile O'Connor - School of Public Health
Aisile was raised in Rochester, MN and completed her undergrad at the University of Minnesota in International Studies & Public Health. Having grown up next to the world-renowned Mayo Clinic and seeing phenomenal, holistic care in action, she developed an early love for public health and a wish that high level care, like what she was privileged to experience, was available to all. Aisile has specific passions in the worlds of reproductive health, nutrition and health care policy, and living with a chronic disease herself, fighting for the right to quality, accessible care, regardless of zip code, is incredibly important to her. For 5 years she lived up in Fargo, ND where she managed two women’s clinics located in Northern Minnesota, and her love for working in and serving rural communities blossomed from there. She’s thrilled to be a part of the RIPLS team to grow her knowledge of how to best improve the health outcomes of rural communities. In her free time, she loves to travel and enjoy trying many new cuisines, as well as fuel her coffee addiction. She also loves photography and you will often find her out on the trails exploring NC’s state parks with her wife and dog!

Patrick Palladino - School of Social Work
Patrick grew up in small town in Western North Carolina, population 600. He has lived in suburban and urban settings in Missouri, New Mexico, and North Carolina, as well as Spain, France, and Japan. Through it all, he prefers the peacefulness, the closely held traditions, and access to nature found in smaller communities. After receiving a double Bachelor’s in Spanish and French from the University of New Mexico, Patrick worked as a photojournalist in High Point and Elizabeth City and taught ESL in France and Japan for 16 years before returning to UNC-CH to pursue his Master’s in Social Work. His dream is to offer behavioral health care on a working farm, preferably in the mountains. In his free time, Patrick likes to exercise, cook, and garden.

Allie Russell - Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, Department of Allied Health Sciences
Allie grew up in Murphy, North Carolina, a significantly underserved town in the western region of the state. Being a Murphy native has shaped Allie’s view on rural healthcare, as she has experienced disparities firsthand. She feels personally connected to the challenges and benefits of establishing a life and family in a rural location. Through her association comes a sense of insight and motivation to serve and provide quality care for those who may not have resources otherwise. Prior to attending UNC to pursue her Master’s in Occupational Therapy, Allie studied Natural and Social Sciences at Western Carolina University. Through her undergraduate involvement, Allie became farther interested in community programming and development, as well as advocacy and philanthropic fundraising. Allie also served as a volunteer in an exceptional children’s classroom, which sparked her interest in working with the pediatric population, specifically with individuals who may have physical and/or mental disabilities. In her free time, Allie enjoys cooking, hiking, going on runs, painting, and traveling.

Courtney Wellington - Physician Assistant Studies, Department of Allied Health Sciences
Courtney, originally from Ohio, relocated as a military spouse to North Carolina. She has a passion for interprofessional education as reflected in her diverse undergraduate education in speech and language science and in biology, as well as her graduate public health education. She found her passion in medicine while working in suburban and rural communities as a paramedic. Her interests in medicine include geriatrics, neurology, infectious disease, end-of-life care, and surgery. Currently, Courtney is residing in a rural county in North Carolina. After graduating from PA school, she hopes to serve the small community in which she lives. In her free time, she enjoys hiking the mountains of western NC with her family (and dog) and working on building a self-sustaining farm life.