

# FOUR STUDENTS, FOUR YEARS, FOUR FUTURE PHYSICIANS

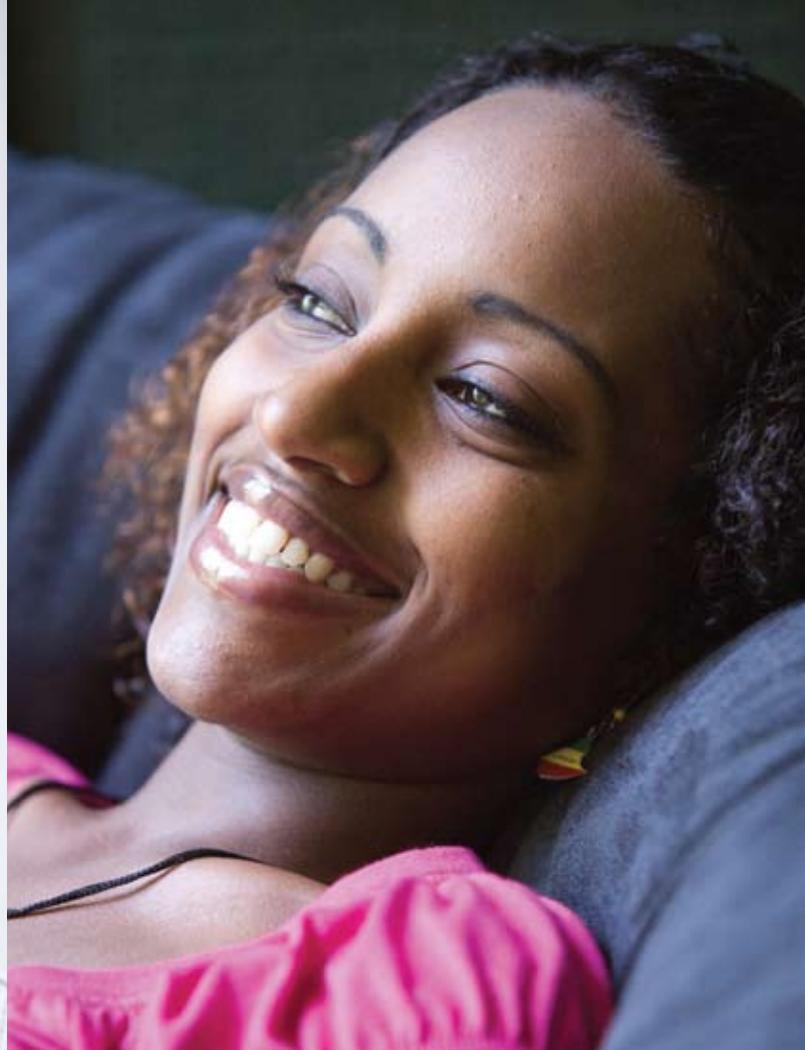
PROFILES BY JEFF MORTIMER  
INTRODUCTION BY RICK KRUPINSKI

# Who

ho will wear the white coats of the future? Meet Shaun Patel, Fasika Aberra, Ron Romero and Lindsay Brown: four students just beginning their first year of study at the University of Michigan Medical School. We'll follow these enthusiastic members of the Class of 2012 for the next four years along their journeys to become doctors of medicine.

Each summer, we'll check in on our foursome to see what the past year has been like: their experiences, their challenges and triumphs, their feelings and reflections — even what they did on Saturday nights. In this way, we'll chronicle medical study and student life in Ann Arbor in the early 21st century, and learn how studying medicine has changed in light of stunning new technologies, burgeoning volumes of data from new fields of research, and the very latest patient treatment approaches.

Year-round, these students will author blogs, accessible on the magazine's Web site, to keep us tied into the ongoing drama — and day-to-day humdrum — of life as a medical student at Michigan. Through their eyes and experiences, we all in a sense shall have the opportunity to attend medical school. Through their idealism, goals and achievements, we'll learn what attaining an M.D. and entering the noble profession of medicine means today — to them, to us and to the world. Through the sights they set on the future, we'll gain a truer sense of what medicine will be like in the years and decades to come.



**SHAUN PATEL** is entering medical school at the age of 20 in part because he skipped third and fourth grades. Being two years younger than everyone else in your class can be a challenge, to say the least, but he turned those would-be lemons into lemonade.

“When you’re that young, small differences in age are sort of magnified,” Patel says, “but it was also a positive thing because I quickly learned to relate to people who weren’t in my age range. I had friends my own age and I also had the chance to meet people who were older than me. I was able to transition smoothly. I played three sports in high school, so it wasn’t a big deal at all.”

The seeds of his passion for achievement — one might almost say his passion for being passionate — were clearly sown early. “My main focus is trying to do my best in all I do and trying to be a leader in all the fields I engage in,” he says.

During the time he was earning his B.S. in biology, he created and chaired the shadowing program of the U-M chapter of Alpha Epsilon Delta, a pre-medical honor society, which he also served as president; co-founded and served as president of the U-M chapter of Students for Organ Donation; was associate editor of the *Journal of Young Investigators*, an undergraduate, peer-reviewed online research journal sponsored by the National Science Foundation and *Science* magazine; participated in research projects in the Department of Surgery and at the National Institutes of Health; did extensive tutoring, and shadowed nine different physicians for a total of 125 hours.

“I’m extremely passionate about the causes I care about,” he says, “and I hope to continue like that, becoming a physician the same way I’ve become a graduate of the University of Michigan.”

“I was always interested in the science fields but not absolutely certain I wanted to do medicine. I figured since it’s an extremely long process to actually become a doctor, the best thing you could do is understand what the career entails before you embark on such a long journey. That’s what I set out to do, and now I’m completely certain that’s

**NAME:** Shaun Prakash Patel

**BORN:** Dearborn, Michigan

**RESIDENCE:** Brownstown, Michigan

**AGE:** 20

**UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOL:** U-M, 2008

**UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR:** Biology

**NON-ACADEMIC INTERESTS:**

Community service, football, hockey, tennis, fitness

what my calling is. The culmination of all these experiences really solidified my decision to go into medicine.”

When he had to make the decision about which medical school to attend, it came down to Michigan and the University of California, Los Angeles. For a lifelong Michigander, the latter’s climate was a strong card. “The weather at UCLA was really drawing me,” he says. Michigan’s hand, however, was even stronger.

“There were plenty of reasons I ended up choosing Michigan,” Patel says, “but probably the most important is the sense of family and togetherness that was displayed here. The Medical School admissions office did a tremendous job of being completely organized and thorough through the whole process. All the faculty seemed very approachable. It seemed like a great environment to study medicine in for four years — and you can’t turn down an institution with a fantastic football program.”

His passion for health and fitness is just as intense as all his others. “I’m a huge sports fan and I love being out-



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doors,” he says. “Whenever I have spare time, I’m playing sports or in the gym. My number one team is the Red Wings, so I’m still on a high from the Stanley Cup!”

Patel was also active as an undergraduate in the Indian American Student Association, and he says his spiritual heritage is an integral part of his ambition to help others. “As a Hindu, one of our main beliefs is the concept of altruism and always putting others in the forefront,” he says. “Being a physician, that’s what you need to do, put the patient first. It’s these very same things that I developed as a child being raised in a Hindu family that I can give to the community in my career as a physician.”

While no one at this stage in life can accurately predict where their path will lead, Patel has set his sights on a classic tripartite career.

“Being an academic physician is perfect for me,” according to Patel, “because I not only have an interest in taking care of other people’s health, but it also allows me to utilize my passion for medical research, and my teaching and tutoring experiences. I can integrate all three things: patient care, research and teaching. To become a leader in the field is sort of my long-term goal. That’s another reason I chose Michigan, because they’re a leader in all three of those areas.”



## As a child growing up in Ethiopia, **FASIKA ABERRA** saw unmet needs everywhere.

Her mother suffered from what Aberra eventually recognized as clinical depression, but there were only a handful of psychiatrists in the entire country. The standard “treatment” for her condition was exorcism. Rejecting that option, Aberra would rub her mother’s feet, hold her hands and read verses to her from the Bible.

When she was in junior high, she went to see a neighbor every week to have her hair braided. “She was the only one who knew how to do it,” Aberra says. “She had heart problems and used to suffer a lot, then she eventually passed away right when I started high school. I kind of wanted to be a physician even before then, but once I saw what happened to her, I was really heartbroken.”

**NAME:** Fasika Berhanu Aberra

**BORN:** Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

**RESIDENCE:** Ann Arbor, Michigan

**AGE:** 23

**UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOL:** U-M, 2008

**UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR:** Psychobiology

**NON-ACADEMIC INTERESTS:** Community service, hospital volunteer, science tutor

## She realized that her country's paucity of medical resources was the root cause of her heartbreaks, which meant that the path she wanted to follow would take her across an ocean.

The images on television didn't help. "I remember seeing all these kids dying of heart diseases because they didn't have cardiovascular hospitals in Ethiopia that provided the right kind of care," she says. "That and a lot of other problems in the community were breaking my heart, too."

She longed to meet those needs. She longed to heal others. And she realized that her country's paucity of medical resources was the root cause of her heartbreaks, which meant that the path she wanted to follow would take her across an ocean.

Aberra was accepted at several American colleges that her parents couldn't afford, so she came to live with an aunt in Pontiac, Michigan, the only member of her family in the United States, and attended an extra year of high school so she could qualify for financial aid as a resident.

"That's when I applied to Michigan," she says. But then some of her test scores were delayed in transit, her aunt moved to Maryland, and she wound up spending a semester in a community college there before finally landing in Ann Arbor to pursue a bachelor's degree in psychobiology at the U-M.

She's candid about the fact that not having to move again was a factor in choosing to stay at Michigan for medical school. "I already went through a lot of changes in my life," she says. But she's quick to add that staying put is not the major reason that "Michigan's a great place to be. It's got a lot of resources, very good people, and it's a nurturing environment for educational experiences as well as personal experiences, social life and cultural diversity."

Aberra contributes to that diversity. While she passed on exorcism for her mother, she's nonetheless keenly attuned to the dimensions of medicine that lie beyond the physical.

"When you say somebody's sick, there are two parts to it," she says. "There is the biological part of what's going on

in the person's body, and then the feelings and emotions and all the other non-physical things that are attached to being sick. The biological problem might not be as serious as the emotional trauma that comes with it."

Her medical experiences so far also reveal diversity. She spent a year working on a research project on the detection of pediatric kidney diseases. As part of the national Summer Medical and Dental Education Program, she shadowed doctors in a range of specialties for six weeks at Case Western Reserve University. "I spent a day with a surgeon," she says, "and I got to watch two surgeries, which was like the coolest thing."

And she shadowed a U-M obstetrician and gynecologist during her junior and senior years. "Each time she met a new patient, she was quick to connect on a personal level," Aberra says. "Her patience and willingness to listen showed me the compassion that one ought to have in order to be a successful physician."

Exactly what form that will take is still an open question. "I haven't really made up my mind yet," she says. "If I don't end up becoming a mental health specialist, I still want to do some work with mental health issues, especially in developing countries where it's not as recognized as it is here."

Whatever her specialty, she's as clear as ever about her path. She wants to practice and do academic medicine and research in the U.S., then get a master's in public health, either in epidemiology or international health, and, she says, "be a health care worker in underserved countries, places where I can really be useful."

It's hard to imagine a place where she wouldn't be. Her core principles travel well: "In order for the healing process to be complete," she says, "the person has to be healed emotionally as well as physically. Doctors in training, like we are, should never forget that."

By the time he reached his late 20s, **RON ROMERO** had already been a consultant at a public financial advisory firm, an assistant at a community medical clinic, a legal assistant at an international corporate law firm, and the first in his family to go to college (Harvard, no less).

Then, as he and his wife were returning to their San Francisco home after a cross-country road trip to visit his mother in Miami, he made up his mind.

“We were somewhere in Arizona,” he recalls. “I was driving and I said, ‘You know what? I’m tired of being afraid of it. I’m tired of not making a choice that seems perfect for me because I’m scared of the financial and personal challenge. I’m just going to do it. I’m going to become a doctor.’”

It was, he says, a monkey off his back. “After I made that decision, I felt the most incredible sense of freedom and lightness.” And after the U-M Medical School offered him a full scholarship and his wife, Jennifer Price, a substantial partial scholarship, he felt even more liberated.

“It was just the most freeing experience I could ever imagine,” Romero says. “You can’t quantify how amazing that is, for allowing us to truly practice how we want to practice, and not have the heavy cloud of debt. I want to work with the underserved, and the financial freedom will allow me to go into that head-first.”

Serving the underserved has been the leitmotif underlying all his pursuits. The financial firm he worked for helped cities and counties issue bonds for school construction, sanitation projects and low-income housing. The clinic was the primary provider of medical services to uninsured patients in its area. And he took the law firm job right out of college to help support his mother, whom he cites as his greatest inspiration.

Romero and his mother moved to Miami from Colombia when he was 18 months old. She spoke no English and took whatever jobs she could to support them.

“Despite having to clean bathrooms and mop floors, she always had a positive attitude — that there were no limits

to what we could do despite our economic circumstances,” he says. “She got up every day with a smile on her face and positive energy. She gave me the model I still use to show me that if I worked hard and always did my best and was kind to people, I’d be able to accomplish anything.”

Romero resolved early on “to figure out how I could contribute to the world in a positive way. For the longest time, I didn’t know what that was,” he says. “It took a lot of soul-searching and a lot of time doing other activities and jobs where I really got to see all the different ways I could

**NAME:** Ronald Romero

**BORN:** Bogota, Colombia

**RESIDENCE:** Millbrae, California

**AGE:** 29

**UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOL:** Harvard University, 2001

**UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR:** Psychology

**NON-ACADEMIC INTERESTS:** Community service, water polo, basketball, football, soccer

make an impact before I finally got to choose the one that was right for me.”

While his involvement in public finance was undeniably beneficial to society, “it was very much detached from the actual experience of the people we were helping,” he says. “I was in my office punching numbers on a computer. I really wanted something where I could help people in a



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much more personal way that allowed me to experience who they were as people. But what I was doing was very stable and somewhat fulfilling, and I wouldn’t have been brave enough to leave that to chase my dream without the support of my wife.”

They had all but made up their minds to attend the University of California, San Francisco, for medical school. After all, that area had been their home for five years. But, in the end, it was their experience with Michigan that won out.

“There was something truly special about Michigan that we had always felt, even from our interview days,” Romero

says. “There was a real sense of family and community, both in the school and the city of Ann Arbor. That sense of family makes you feel like you’re one of their own and that they’ll take care of you. And then financially, they offered more than any other school and more than we could have imagined when we started this process. You can’t beat a full scholarship at an incredible place like Michigan.”

Lest he appear one-dimensional, however admirable that dimension may be, Romero confesses to something else that can’t be beat. “I’m a big sports fan,” he says. “Being able to go to Michigan Stadium and cheer the football team is another reason Michigan is very exciting for me.”



## If such a thing is possible, **LINDSAY KENNEDY BROWN** has almost too many interests.

When she began her undergraduate career at Johns Hopkins University, she envisioned a double major in chemistry and English “because growing up I loved science and I loved writing,” she says. Then a course in the epidemiology of violence turned her head. “I took it almost by accident as a freshman,” says Brown. “To be perfectly honest, public health wasn’t something I knew about before getting to Hopkins, but it seemed to be a major where I could explore so many of the interests I have. I could take all the science and pre-med courses but also express my interest in English and history and social science.”

She took classes in disaster response, emergency food and nutrition relief, and refugee health care. She earned a certificate in humanitarian assistance. She served as co-editor-in-chief of *Epidemic Proportions*, the Hopkins undergraduate

**NAME:** Lindsay Kennedy Brown

**BORN:** Salem, Massachusetts

**RESIDENCE:** Marblehead, Massachusetts

**AGE:** 22

**UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOL:**

Johns Hopkins University, 2008

**UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR:** Public health

**NON-ACADEMIC INTERESTS:**

Community service, tutoring, writing, swimming

public health journal. Brown and her co-editor overhauled its design and editorial process and produced two issues instead of the standard one per year.

“It opened my eyes to what’s going on in the world,” she says. “I became aware of so many possibilities that I didn’t know existed. I feel so fortunate that I ended up as a public health major. Now it’s something I’m positive I’ll pursue for the rest of my life.”

Brown had been positive she wanted to be a physician since she was 6 years old, when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Given six months to live, her mother survived for 10 years.

The range of her interests notwithstanding, the disease that claimed her mother’s life has stayed, and will remain, in her crosshairs.

“I’m very grateful for that, obviously,” she says. “She had a chance to raise my sister and me and inspire us to live life to the fullest. I think things fall into place in unexpected ways.”

For example, the inadvertent inspiration of her mother’s illness: “She would take my sister and me to doctor appointments and it became a normal thing,” says Brown. “I really got a perspective on the influence physicians have, not only on the patient’s life but the whole family. When I went to college, I got involved with research and volunteer work and medical shadowing, and I couldn’t see myself doing anything else.”

The range of her interests notwithstanding, the disease that claimed her mother’s life has stayed, and will remain, in her crosshairs. She spent the summer between her sophomore and junior years in Sweden, working on a research project investigating the factors that affect a woman’s breast cancer screening practices. She took a tutorial in breast cancer surgery. In the summer of 2007, the Seattle-based Breast Health Global Initiative created an internship for her.

“The whole issue of chronic diseases in developing countries is really an emerging field,” Brown says. “It’s certainly something I see myself being involved in as the years go on.”

The next four of those years will be spent at Michigan. As she tells it, it was another one of those things that fell into place: “I asked my pre-med advisor where I should apply to medical school, and she said, ‘I’m not allowed to tell you, but if I were, I’d tell you to apply to Michigan. I can really see you there.’ So I put Michigan on my list and didn’t think much of it. Then I went for my first interview and absolutely fell in love with it. There were 50 of us interviewing and at least 50 medical students came. I thought, ‘Oh my goodness, all these students are taking time to come to our interviews. These people are great.’ It’s almost like it wasn’t a decision.”

Needless to say, numerous decisions await her, but Brown is in no hurry to find a congenial box.

“I certainly hope I can find ways to merge my passions for writing, medicine and public health in the years to come,” she says. “I haven’t decided about a master’s in public health, but I’m really excited that Michigan has a fantastic school of public health and I’ll have the opportunity to take classes and work with researchers there even if I don’t get a degree.”

“And I definitely see myself staying involved with breast cancer, although I’m not sure if that’s going to be on the oncology side or the surgery side. I really don’t know where the next four years are going to take me. I’m going to keep an open mind. There’s so much I don’t know yet, and I don’t want to close myself off to any possibilities.”

Based on her record so far, that hardly seems likely. [M]

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