

# Public Health Perspectives

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## **PUBLIC HEALTH PERSPECTIVES #13**



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### **Living my dream as a Dentist working in Public Health**

#### **My Public Health Career**

I have a Bachelor of Science in Public Health. After I graduated from The University of Arizona in 2013, I worked in digital marketing, public health, and health informatics. I always wanted to be a dentist since the age of five. I did not have the knowledge of how to get there compared to my peers. It took me longer, my degree in public health did not meet all the requirements for dental school, and I still had to take a few classes to apply. Also, during this time I traveled a lot, I was not ready for dental school until I was 30 and that was fine because it was expensive-mentally, physically and financially.

When I started working a real job with benefits and health insurance I learned there is a lot of politics, best advice is do your work and go home. Don't let a job stress you out, listen to your body. We live in a capitalistic country at the end of the day it is a business and businesses need to make money and once I realized that I learned how to navigate in the workforce.

Although I took the non-traditional route to dental school it was worth it to me. I got experience working and traveled a lot. I was ready for dental school and to enter the workforce afterwards.

I recommend students interested in dental school to look into post-baccalaureate (post-bacc) programs specifically at medical and dental schools. This way you can pick medical and dental students' brains, shadow them, and meet with staff and faculty of the dental school. These post-

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November 14, 2025

Page 1

baccalaureate (post-bacc) programs really prepare you mentally for a healthcare doctoral program. I did the two-year Biomedical Sciences program at Midwestern. I was able to increase my GPA, learn how to actually study and it made me a better health care professional.

### **National Health Service Scholarship (NHSC)**

NHSC was established because of the health care crisis in the 1950s and 1960s. Older physicians retired, and young doctors stopped choosing general practice. This meant areas of the country would have no access to primary care.

I cannot remember how I came to learn about the **National Health Service Corps (NHSC)**. I am part Native American, and I did know about the Indian Health Services (IHS) scholarship. I may have stumbled across **Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA)** around that time. Since the deadline for the IHS passed and I did not get accepted into dental school until April 2021, I decided to apply for the NHSC scholarship.

I have my undergrad in public health, worked and volunteered in public health and I knew I wanted to work in public health after dental school. When I found out about the scholarship I applied, and I was accepted into dental school at the perfect time. It was right after COVID and federal agencies were receiving COVID money, NHSC received about one billion dollars for scholarships and loan repayments. They were practically begging us to apply for this scholarship.

I applied right before the deadline, and you usually do not find out until September if you were awarded the scholarship. I had read on forums some students did not receive the scholarship, with the experience I had or even more and it was nerve-racking waiting so long. Questioning am I going to be \$700K+ in debt when I graduate dental school?

Thank God, I received the scholarship and the four-year commitment! There were about 15 students in my class who were awarded the four-year commitment, and I think the c/o 2025 awarded the most students because of the money they received. Fulfilling your contract requires you to work at a Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA). HPSA are geographic areas, populations, or facilities that have a shortage of primary, dental, or mental health care providers. My HPSA score was a 3, so could basically work anywhere not too rural or far from a city.

Being a recipient was easy while in school. The most annoying chore of having the scholarship was verifying my enrollment verification every quarter, if you missed a deadline by two seconds here NHSC comes with all the emails. NHSC did not have a GPA requirement which was a relief. They, however, did not pay for repeated classes.

I never had to repeat classes so if you do or did find yourself in that predicament just be mindful of the loans you may have to take out to repeat those classes. NHSC did not pay for everything, I still took out loans to pay for housing, food and transportation. My stipend was between \$1200-\$1400 per month and it would increase each fiscal year. The stipend was not enough, but I learned how to make it enough.

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November 14, 2025

Page 2

The scholarship took that additional stress away of having to think about paying \$700K back in student loans. As I work, I get paid and so does my education, so I put in the time I get paid and so does my dental school education.

My tutor turned colleague helped me with my placement. I followed in her footsteps, asked her questions about the process. I was born and raised in AZ, so I was ready to try something and somewhere different. My first choice was the east coast but after research and realizing how far away from home I would be I decided on Northern California.

## **Dental School**

Some of the challenges I faced through my professional career was racism and microaggressions. I was the only Afro-Indigenous woman in my dental class of about 140 students. Dentistry has been dominated by Caucasian males and entering this field was a challenge for me because I was the first one in my family to go to dental school.

I faced challenges with my peers and professors because I like to describe myself as being cut from a different piece of cloth and there is nothing wrong with that. I know who I was, and I am because of Jesus. I also challenged authority and questioned the system a lot and I advise you to do the same.

I had thyroid cancer during dental school. As a result of dealing with this health issue, I failed several exams and classes. I failed written boards twice, but I passed on the third attempt. There were so many activities and quality time I missed out on because of school. I missed out on birthdays, vacations, time with family and being able to process my emotions. In school I had to compartmentalize my emotions because I had exams. Passing exams meant I stayed in school, obviously, but most importantly I was able to pay my bills. The thorn and rose about dental school is they tell you what your life is, you are on their time. It is a rose because it helped me become structured, the thorn because I was on a schedule I did not have much personal time.

Just to name a few classes that are in dental school: dental anatomy, pharmacology, basic sciences, dental materials, and oral pathology. Clinical practice was different because on pre-clinical you are taught textbook dentistry and clinical practice is a human being. We worked in pairs so my third year of dental school I was paired with a fourth-year dental student, and we would switch being the provider and assistant. There were some challenges I faced but I learned quickly and was able to adjust.

## **Working at a Community Health Center**

Working as a dentist at a community center has its ups and downs. Fulfilling work serving underserved populations, predictable hours for a good work-life balance, robust benefits including student loan repayment, and no business ownership stress. However, potential cons include lower earning potential than private practice, limited specialization and treatment options.

For now I see 14 patients per day and will soon increase to 18. The most fulfilling part of being a dentist, and they teach us this in dental school, is saying no. I do not have to see a patient if I do not feel comfortable treating them or I can recommend them to a specialist. The most challenging part is when to say no and yes. I do want to help and see my patients yet sometimes I am unable to. The patient population at the clinic I work at is a low-income population.

What is most fulfilling is getting people out of pain. I became a dentist because I enjoy smiling and laughing. Laughter is the best medicine, and everyone deserves to smile and laugh, I want to contribute to the removal of obstacles to care.

### **Lessons I learned**

Be prepared for sacrifice and challenges, but it is all worth it in the end. Find a mentor in the area you are interested in pursuing, ask a lot of questions, shadow and become a volunteer. Dentistry is challenging, I like to be challenged facing difficulty and suffering it produces perseverance, character and hope - Romans 5:3-5.

As I mentioned before, I recommend students interested in dental school look into post-baccalaureate (post-bacc) programs specifically at medical and dental schools. This way you can pick medical and dental students' brains, shadow them, and meet with staff and faculty of the dental and/or medical school. These post-baccalaureate (post-bacc) programs really prepare you mentally for a healthcare doctoral program.

### **Resources**

#### **National Health Service Scholarship (NHSC)**

<https://nhsc.hrsa.gov/about-us>

#### **Athens's Blog – I'm Flossy**

<https://thedmddiaries.com>

You can reach her at [dramgravesdmd@gmail.com](mailto:dramgravesdmd@gmail.com)

#### **See Athens's bio-sketch on the PHENOM Directory at:**

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Page 4