



TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 31, 2020

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Celebrating Future Physicians with a Parade

TTUHSC School of Medicine and Alumni Relations welcomed new class with white coats, scrubs and stethoscopes

The Macy's Thanksgiving Parade and Rose Parade are classic American traditions with floats and bands. With increasing health risks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) School of Medicine Office of Student Affairs and Alumni Relations hosted a welcome parade Friday (July 31) for first-year medical students – replacing the traditional parade fanfare with stethoscopes, white coats and scrubs.

More than 160 medical students took part in the School of Medicine Welcome Parade. Steven L. Berk, M.D., TTUHSC executive vice president and dean of the School of Medicine, said while the pandemic changed the yearly White Coat Ceremony and events provided for first-year medical students, the school wanted to welcome the students in some way.

“We were very disappointed that we could not do the White Coat Ceremony like we normally do,” Berk said. “This was the next best thing where the students drove through in their cars, and we celebrated with them as we presented their white coat, scrubs and stethoscopes and congratulated them on what is essentially the first day of medical school.”

The Class of 2024 includes 180 students (104 women and 76 men) chosen from more than 4,000 applicants. Berk said this class is diverse and accomplished. Fifteen students joined the Family Medicine Accelerated Track program, 13 students will earn a joint medical and business degree with the M.D./MBA program, seven with the joint medical and public health M.D./MPH degree and two students will work toward a dual M.D./Ph.D. degree.

Berk said traditionally the White Coat Ceremony welcomes medical students into the profession of medicine where they all take an oath promising to always put their patient first, even those who are vulnerable, and most importantly, that they will begin a career of lifelong learning.

“This pandemic is a reminder of the need for physicians also to be teachers for the public, to have a great work ethic and to be committed to doing their very best every day,” Berk said. “The white coat stands for that commitment. In the past, it's always been a great opportunity to thank family members and spouses for the sacrifices that they've made for these students. We want them to know even though they can't be with us today, that we know how important it is for them, as well as for their children or spouses.”

Along with their coveted white coat, the medical students received their first stethoscopes from Alumni Relations. Clarissa Sanchez, Alumni Relations manager, said normally the stethoscopes

and first set of scrubs are presented at the annual Scrub Party.

“We value our students and the journey they're about to embark on,” Sanchez said. Although their friends and family cannot come and celebrate with us, we felt it was important to provide them with the opportunity to receive their TTUHSC branded stethoscope and to celebrate and welcome them to campus.”

Sanchez said each year stethoscopes are sponsored by TTUHSC alumni donors and friends in order to provide each student with their first stethoscope. Also, this year UMC Health System donated \$10,000 to the students for stethoscopes.

Two medical students said even though the traditional ceremonies are different this year, there is still excitement for the new semester.

Sofia Altamirano grew up in Germany before moving to San Antonio. She received her high school degree at the age of 16, finished her undergraduate degree at 19 before completing her master's degree at Villanova University. Now a first-year medical student in the M.D./Ph.D. program, she said she values the support from the School of Medicine and donors.

“I think that the School of Medicine put a lot of consideration into the parade,” Altamirano said. “I want to say thank you, and I'm very grateful. The stethoscopes are a very meaningful gift, especially coming from a previous class. When I got my master's degree, I experienced the other side of struggling to pay tuition and struggling to pay living expenses, and that can definitely have an impact on how you're able to succeed as a student. It is incredible because I feel like I have unlimited potential.”

Daemar Jones, a first-year medical student from Arlington, found his discipline on the basketball court. As the shortest player on the team, he was determined to succeed. The sport helped him develop discipline – a trait he says has been critical in academics. Jones completed his undergraduate degree from Texas Tech University, but as a first-generation student, he said he believed he needed more academic experience to prepare for medical school. This May he completed his master's degree in biomedical sciences with a concentration in Graduate Medical Sciences at TTUHSC. As he starts medical school, he called the welcome parade a surreal experience.

“I know we're all very appreciative to the School of Medicine for all they have done to welcome us and to the donors for the stethoscopes that will be so valuable,” Jones said. “I'm blessed to be able to go to medical school here. It still hasn't hit me yet that I'm even in medical school because this was a hard battle for me. To have a stethoscope for the first time, to have the white coat and the scrubs, helps me realize I'm actually going to be a doctor, what I aspire to be.”