CLASS NOTES

‘80s When Lee Shapiro (Internal Medicine Resident ’80, Rheumatology fellow ’82) came to Pittsburgh for residency, the first patient he saw had scleroderma, an autoimmune disease that hardens skin and connective tissues. Shapiro ultimately centered his practice on helping people like that first patient. Now, in Albany, N.Y., he directs the Steffens Scleroderma Center, which conducts clinical trials for scleroderma and Degos disease, a similar but little-known vascular condition that is often fatal. The center is now cosponsoring a bench research project in collaboration with the National Institutes of Health and the Ottawa Hospital Research Institute to learn more about Degos disease and underlying pathways. “Not many talk about these diseases. I think that needs to change,” he says. “That’s one of our main goals here.”

Karen Boretsky’s (MD ’84) daughter reached into the trash and pulled out a flier for Operation Smile, a charity for children with facial deformities. Boretsky had dismissed the flier when she saw it in the mail, but her daughter challenged her to take action. Soon, she was in China helping patients to manage pain. Boretsky, then a Pitt Med faculty member and now assistant professor of anesthesiology at Harvard, was thankful for her daughter’s prod. Boretsky has since taken residents on similar missions to Guatemala, Zambia, Ethiopia, and Bhutan through Surgicorps International. They learn the basic necessities of anesthesia, like how a ventilator may run mechanically rather than electronically. “There’s a lot of information to be gained by holding a breathing bag and feeling it,” she says. Stateside, Boretsky guides trainees through pediatric regional anesthesia at Boston Children’s Hospital.

During his early days at Pitt Med, David Peace (MD ’80, Internal Medicine Resident ’83) was inspired by his mentor Thomas Gill (now professor emeritus) to look beyond conventional cancer therapies to immunotherapy, the targeting of malignant tumors with one’s own immune system. Peace, professor of medicine and training program director at the University of Illinois, now focuses on CAR T-cell therapy, a method that enlists engineered human T-cells to seek and destroy malignant tumors. The first CAR T-cell therapy was approved in August for use in a select pediatric population; other uses are under review. Peace says, “I’ve watched my lightbulb moment from back in my early days go on to clinical development and successful achievement. We have a long way to go, but the door is now open.”

When we talked to William Petit Jr. (MD ’82) three years ago, he shared news of the Petit Family Foundation, created in memory of his wife, Jennifer, and children, Michaela and Hayley, who were murdered during a home invasion in 2007. The foundation has awarded approximately $2.5 million in grant support for shelters and other programs for those affected by violence in Connecticut. As the foundation marked its 10th anniversary this fall, Petit added a new title to his accomplishments: legislator. He was elected in 2016 to the Connecticut House of Representatives. “I thought it was time to try and create change,” says Petit. He follows several of his family members into government service.

‘90s After Jeffrey Quinlan (MD ’92) graduated from Pitt Med, he joined the navy as part of the Health Professions Scholarship Program. He has since been deployed three times in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Stationed at the Uniformed Services University in Bethesda, Md., Quinlan holds the rank of captain and serves as chair of family medicine. He recently received a $1.1 million grant to develop interventions to reduce unwanted pregnancies and STIs in service members. He also serves on the editorial board of the Advanced Life Support in Obstetrics program, an effort to train maternity care providers in the United States and 55 other countries to effectively manage obstetric emergencies.

From her second-year neuroscience class at Pitt Med, Anahita Deboo’s (MD ’97) fascination with the intricacies of the nervous system only grew. She pursued a neurology residency at the University of Pennsylvania and further specialized in clinical neurophysiology and neuromuscular medicine. Then she joined the faculty at Drexel University, where she directed the clinical neurophysiology fellowship program. Recently, she moved to Temple University as associate professor of clinical neurology. Deboo is involved in clinical trials for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) treatments and codirects Temple’s MDA/ALS Center of Hope clinic. Among the center’s many ongoing projects are tissue collection, phase III clinical trials, cognitive behavioral studies, and brain-computer interface studies designed to help ALS patients communicate. “Right now is a very exciting time for ALS because of all the new therapeutics that are on the horizon,” she says.

‘00s The brain is like a battery, says Jed Hartings (PhD ’00), associate professor of neurosurgery at the University of Cincinnati. As a founding member of the Co-Operative Studies on Brain Injury Depolarizations (COSBID) research consortium, Hartings studies how the battery loses its charge after a traumatic brain injury. “We’re discovering how the brain dies,” he says. Doctors in the field have nicknamed this spreading loss of charge a “brain tsunami.” In March, COSBID held an international conference on brain tsunamis in Berlin, where scientists from Asia, Europe, and the Americas presented their latest research. Hartings studies the brain tsunami mechanism with Pitt’s own David Okonkwo, clinical director at the Brain Trauma Research Center.

While working in the OR during a mission to Tanzania, neurosurgeon Christopher Bonfield (MD ’07, Neurological Surgery Residency ’14) realized that the electric drill normally used to remove portions of the skull...
In a borrowed van, 13 Pitt Med students bumped along the back roads of a 120-acre apple orchard last spring. “The funniest moment was figuring out who was going to sit on whose lap,” says Henry Shoenthal (MD ’72). “We didn’t have enough room for everyone to have a seat.”

That kind of community spirit is the reason Shoenthal, a family physician in his hometown of New Paris, Pa., loves what he does and where he does it. Having practiced in this area for 45 years, he’s now on a mission to entice more physicians to greener pastures. Or to pastures at least.

Of his practice, he says, “I usually don’t have to ask for a family history because, in many cases, I already know it,” he explains. The population of New Paris is less than 200 people. Many of his patients have roots in the region that date back decades or even centuries. Shoenthal’s own family has been here since 1868.

Shoenthal speaks of a vibrant social life at a more relaxed pace and a comparable salary to his urban peers. “People think they can make more money in the city, but to recruit people here, you have to pay the same as in urban centers.”

Lifestyle benefits aside, Shoenthal says there’s an urgency for more physicians in the countryside. “Rural America is suffering. Right here in Bedford County, there are only about 15 of us practicing pediatrics, family practice, and internal medicine—and half are over 55.” Part of his outreach this year involved hosting Pitt’s student-run Rural Medicine Interest Group, which included the orchard tour, as well as a visit to his office.

Grace Lisius, second-year med student and coordinator of the spring field trip, was attracted by the prospect of a rural practice. “I have a healthy appreciation for the outdoors that doesn’t always go together with medical school. It seemed like Dr. Shoenthal had a really great setup, owning land and being part of a community that he [has followed] for generations.”

Drawing on the students’ enthusiasm, Shoenthal established an endowed fund to offer perpetual support for rural health education. Shoenthal tells students, “Don’t give up on rural areas. Think about it.”

—Kristin Bundy

HENRY SHOENTHAL

PASTORAL ROUNDERG

TRIALS AND CELEBRATIONS

Pitt emergency medicine professor Susan Dunmire (MD ’85, Emergency Medicine Resident ’88) and Samuel A. Fisherman (MD ’85, Surgery Resident ’93, Critical Care Fellow ’94), a University of Maryland surgery prof, with their son Robert Fisherman (MD ’17) at the luncheon for his graduating class. Last fall, Sam’s clinical trials on the effectiveness of extreme hypothermia as a way to buy more time for cardiac arrest patients—a project that started here at Pitt, with Peter Safar—made ink in The New Yorker.
PHILIP TROEN
NOV. 24, 1925–SEPT. 1, 2017

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Born in Portland, Maine, Troen left his hometown at age 15 to attend Harvard College for his undergraduate studies and medical education. He joined Pitt Med in 1964 as professor of medicine and chief of medicine at what’s now UPMC Montefiore, beginning a 50-year career in which he shaped medical education at Pitt.

One of Troen’s Montefiore interns from 1975, E.J. Donnelly (Res ’78), now a retired internist, remembers the “morning report,” when they’d sit at a round table and present cases. “That was a great learning experience. … He asked excellent questions.”

Troen copiloted the integrated case studies course at Pitt Med in 1992, introducing students to mock patient cases. Paula Clemens—professor of neurology, microbiology and molecular genetics, pediatrics, and human genetics—led the course with Troen and says his commitment to the scholarly process stuck with her as a teacher of med students. “He had a willingness to accept all that it took to develop clinicians.”

After becoming assistant dean of medicine in 2000, Troen led the design and implementation of the Scholarly Research Project, now a model for medical schools seeking to integrate research into their curricula.

Arthur Levine, senior vice chancellor for the health sciences and John and Gertrude Petersen Dean of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, says Troen was a skilled educator with an “infectious” passion for science. The med school’s Philip Troen, MD, Excellence in Medical Student Research Mentoring Award recognizes a faculty advisor who excels at leading students through their Scholarly Research Projects.

—Evan Bowen-Gaddy

ROBERT WILKINS
AUG. 18, 1934–MARCH 31, 2017

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After Robert and Gloria (EDUC ’58) earned their Pitt degrees, they moved near Duke University, where Wilkins completed his internship and residency. He later became professor and chief of neurosurgery there, a post he held for 20 years.

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After Wilkins’s 50th Pitt Med reunion, the duo established the Robert and Gloria Kohl Wilkins Student Resource Fund at Pitt.

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Raul Ruiz (Res ’06) was 17 when he banged out a contract on a manual typewriter, polished his dress shoes, borrowed a briefcase, and bought an itchy navy suit two sizes too big. “I wanted one to grow into as an investment for medical school interviews,” he explains.

Then he proceeded to walk door-to-door in the hot desert sun, talking to business owners and store clerks alike. In exchange for his neighbors’ financial support, Ruiz stipulated that he would earn an MD and return to his underserved Southern California community. “This was my life goal and mission,” says Ruiz, now 44. “I was inviting people to invest in their future.”

Ruiz and his neighbors have continued building on that youthful bond. A board-certified emergency doc, Ruiz was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2012, when the political neophyte unseated seven-term incumbent Mary Bono.

Ruiz never aspired to elected office, but for a kid raised in a trailer and coached to offer solutions, not complaints, the trajectory seems inevitable. Born in Mexico, Ruiz was reared by an aunt and uncle, migrant farm laborers who worked the fields of California’s Coachella Valley. The family couldn’t afford health insurance, yet that wasn’t the biggest obstacle to accessing medical care. The region had just one doctor for every 9,000 residents. No matter where Ruiz turned, it was hard to miss the desperate medical needs of his neighbors in the low-income, predominantly agricultural, and increasingly Latino community.

With pledges of support from his neighbors plus $2,000 in hand, Ruiz attended UCLA, graduated magna cum laude, and earned three graduate degrees from Harvard (an MD, as well as master’s degrees in public policy and public health). He did a few stints abroad as a public health worker in Mexico, El Salvador, and Serbia; trained in emergency medicine at Pitt; and returned home in 2007.

On his first overnight shift in the Coachella Valley’s Eisenhower Medical Center emergency department, he had six patients in respiratory distress, all of whom had to be intubated and stabilized. “I was so thankful that night for my Pitt mentors and professors,” he says. “I chose emergency medicine because the emergency department is the true safety net of our nation—it’s open 24/7 and required by law to take care of anyone with a life-threatening illness or severe emergency, regardless of their ability to pay, where they’re from, or their background.”

He kept busy off-hours, too. He rose to the rank of senior associate dean of community engagement and partnerships at the University of California, Riverside School of Medicine, and founded the Coachella Valley Healthcare Initiative. He also founded a pre-med mentorship program, Future Physician Leaders, for aspiring docs intent on practicing in their underserved home communities. He helped open a free primary care clinic and served with the nonprofit Flying Doctors of America. “My heart and soul was in the community,” he says, “with my patients, with the people in the greatest need for health care and facing the greatest barriers.”

Having long grappled with the profound effects of factors like income, race, and educational status on his patients’ health outcomes, Ruiz felt that a run for Congress seemed the best next step. A member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, he’s made affordable health care, veterans’ services, and transparency his priorities.

“When we live in a society that is healthy and productive, we all benefit,” he says. “The bottom line of a health care system is to produce a healthy population. That’s how we should measure our success in health care.”