

PITTMED

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I raise up my voice—not so
I can shout but so that those
without a voice
can be heard.
—Malala Yousafzai

Associate professor of psychiatry Sansea Jacobson told our cover story writer, Cara Masset, how a student helped spark a transformation process at UPMC. A few years ago, a med student applying for a psychiatry residency asked Dr. Jacobson, “What does your residency program do for wellness?” The student knew that the intense clinical training could exact a toll on mental health.

There wasn’t a formal structure in place then, but there is now—thanks, in part, to that applicant’s inquiry. Several residency programs had been attempting to help clinicians with personal resilience. Today, Dr. Jacobson and associate professor of plastic surgery Vu Nguyen cochair a committee that works across UPMC residencies to make deeper changes to the systems that contribute to burnout; it’s called WELL (Wellness, Environment, Learning and Living). The initiative has not only enriched UPMC residencies—the online toolkit developed by the program organizers also is being adopted by the national accrediting body for graduate medical education as a model. (Learn more about addressing clinician mental health issues in “Be Well,” our cover story starting on page 25.)

Young people have been a catalyst for change at Pitt Med, as they have been, historically, throughout the world. University of Pittsburgh students have stood up to inequity, injustice and structural racism. Pitt students have been strong advocates against environmental degradation. They’ve shown us that there are many ways to initiate transformations through individual actions: They’ve found a way to recycle plastic medical waste. They’ve designed a device to generate oxygen for under-resourced hospitals. They have worked with communities to combat health disparities. And much more.

Pitt students saw a community struggling during the pandemic, so they stepped up: They volunteered to provide childcare so that local clinicians could see patients. They delivered medications to the most vulnerable. They nurtured incoming medical students—who were physically distanced from their classmates and professors from their first days here—in a variety of creative ways, from individual mentoring to compiling a cookbook of favorite recipes submitted by members of the Pitt Med community.

Despite an extraordinary final year full of challenges created by a pandemic—reduced clinical operations, canceled off-site rotations, travel restrictions and virtual residency interviews—the Class of 2021 graduated with great flourish, and had one of the best residency match outcomes. This issue’s “What a Finish!” and “Pulled Away from the Lab” stories celebrate our MD and PhD students and how they managed during these trying times.

I’m so proud of our students. It is not just their advocacy and heart that I admire, but also their catalytic role in transforming our society.

Anantha Shekhar, MD, PhD

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