

WHEN MRSA CAME TO HER DOOR

Michelle Sunjoo Lee is a gentlewoman and a scholar. And a musician. And an athlete. The energetic 17-year-old, who will be a senior at North Allegheny High School this fall, won the Young Epidemiology Scholars Competition in Washington, D.C., for research she conducted at Pitt. She worked under the guidance of Bruce Lee (no relation), an MD and assistant professor of medicine and biomedical informatics in the School of Medicine and of epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health, to design a computer model that examined the cost-effectiveness of testing high school athletes for MRSA.

Michelle approached Dr. Lee a few years ago after she was shocked to learn that MRSA, a highly antibiotic-resistant infection typically confined to hospitals, was claiming the lives of high school athletes across the country. There was even a case of MRSA at Michelle's school, though, fortunately, it was not fatal. "It was interesting to know that MRSA was actually coming to my front door, to my own school, so that piqued my interest even more," she says. As a tennis player and a rower, Michelle wanted to understand how the infection could be prevented in young athletes like herself.

During the two-year project, Michelle was able to determine the prevalence rate of MRSA at which routine testing of skin infections is cost-effective. Her research earned her first place at the national competition.

"I think the best part was getting to meet these other high school students from all around the country who were really passionate about their topics," she says excitedly. Never mind the all-expense-paid trip or the $50,000 scholarship she scooped up.

In addition to her scientific achievements, Michelle is also an accomplished pianist; she's given six solo performances at Carnegie Hall in New York City, as well as one at the United Nations.

Although both of her parents—Joon and Grace Lee (Grace is shown here with Michelle)—are professors at Pitt med, she's not sure that med school is in her future.

"In terms of career, I want to pursue kind of a combination of medical research, medical engineering, and public health," she says confidently.

She's certainly off to a good start. *—Alexis Wnuk*

—Photograph by Martha Rial