

Rob Strong



KEEPING IN MOTION

ARA BACKES LIKES TO STAY BUSY. As an MD-PhD student at the Geisel School of Medicine, her workload is heavier than most, but that doesn't stop her from getting involved in many projects and pursuing two of her favorite hobbies—camping and kayaking.

"I really feel like I'm enjoying life," she says. "I think one of the reasons I keep saying yes to things is because I find joy in them. And I like the buzz of having a lot of things going on."

Backes says she knew she wanted to go into medicine around age eleven, though she doesn't have a clear memory of her reason. "I think maybe I'd seen some examples of doctors being good, kindhearted people, and thought that sounded good," she says. Along the way, mentors and education programs inspired her. "As I learned more, my passion and curiosity for human biology and medicine just kept growing," she says.

As an immigrant from Peru, Backes found that college was initially out of reach financially, so she took time off after high school before attending Miami Dade College. It was there that she met James Ley, PhD, an organic chemistry professor who gave Backes her first exposure to research. "I credit him with giving me the push I needed to realize that I wanted to pursue an MD-PhD," she says.

Backes continued her undergraduate studies at the University of Florida at Gainesville, where she earned a bachelor's in biochemistry. She continued her involvement in research, studying hypertension and physiology. She also volunteered in the Mobile Outreach Clinic, which offers medical care in underserved areas.

Because her husband is a New Hampshire native whose family still lives in the state, after college Backes looked at MD-PhD programs in New England. "I interviewed here and loved it," she says. "It felt like a place that has a lot of potential for nurturing, somewhere that would help me develop professionally, and also grow as a person. The medical students

here seem happy—it's stressful, but they also seem like they're enjoying their time here."

As an undergraduate, Backes was so focused on academics she felt that she had missed out on some opportunities. "One of the things I wanted to change when I finally got to medical school was to be able to enjoy the journey as well as the destination. I felt that at Geisel I could do that. The people I met in the program made me feel right at home."

In her first year at Geisel, Backes became involved in the Latino Medical Student Association (LMSA), then became the co-president of the Geisel Chapter. She was then elected regional co-director of LMSA's Northeast Region. "It's been an incredible position for me," she says. "It has helped me develop leadership skills. I now understand how to help people work as a team to accomplish goals. It's been wonderful to meet the future faces of medicine as they are developing, just like me."

She's also participated in Project Salud, a student-run mobile clinic offering medical and dental screening and care to migrant farm workers at six dairying farms in New Hampshire and Vermont.

This summer, Backes mentored an undergraduate who visited Geisel for the MD-PhD Undergraduate Summer Fellowship Program. "I had a student at the lab with me, and showed them around New England a bit," she says. "It's a great opportunity for MD-PhDs like me who want to stay in academia. I got to coach them on how to think about research, how to put together posters and presentations, and how to approach clinic."

Now in her fourth year of the MD-PhD program, Backes' research

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interests have turned to immunology and virology. With David Leib, PhD, a virologist at Geisel, and Margaret Ackerman, PhD, a biomolecular engineer at Thayer, she is studying new therapies for neonatal herpes. "I think I lucked out," she says. "I have two wonderful mentors who give me enough room to develop scientifically but make sure my other interests continue, too."

While Backes loves research, she says she will always want to see patients as well. "I think in some sense we direct our research, but we also find a thread and start unraveling it, so who knows where that will take me. I want to develop clinically and as a physician-scientist, and I know I will always continue to advocate for access to healthcare for everyone."

Will she always be so busy? "I'm not sure I'm super great at relaxing for extended periods of time," she says, "but I do like to take a few hours to kayak and just drift down the river and forget about the rest of the world for a little while."

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