

# PAYING IT FORWARD

WHEN GEISEL FIRST-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENT CHAD LEWIS THINKS BACK TO HIS YOUTH, THE SIGNS THAT HE MIGHT BE DESTINED FOR A CAREER IN MEDICINE WERE THERE.

“ALWAYS HAD A CURIOSITY about how things around me worked as a kid,” says Lewis. “My parents were also great at exposing me to science through books and visits to places like the California Academy of Sciences and the Exploratorium. When my mom bought me my first microscope, I loved it—I can remember running straight home after scraping my knee so I could make my best impression of a blood smear and watch all the cells move around.”

Lewis, who grew up as an only child in a hardworking, mostly blue-collar family in San Francisco, was also deeply affected by the suffering and premature deaths he witnessed of several family members due to chronic, lifestyle-related illnesses.

The loss of his father, who died when Lewis was nine, was particularly painful and would, for a time, send him on a different path. “After my dad died, I didn’t take school very seriously and I started getting into a lot of trouble,” he says.

Looking for ways to give him positive male influences, Lewis’ mom got him a stint as a ball boy for the University of California at Davis football team.

“That’s where I met Alonzo Grant, a star defensive end and premed major (now a practicing OB/GYN in Miami) who took me under his wing and essentially became my ‘big brother,’” he says. “Alonzo was the first of a few key role models who stepped in at the right time when I really needed somebody.”

Another “adopted family member” was “Uncle Eddie,” a Marine who was the uncle and guardian of a childhood friend—whose military influence added to a long line of distinguished veterans from Lewis’ own family (including his dad, who was among the



Chad Lewis '20 (right) with (left to right) Dr. Alonzo Grant, Paul Risotti, and his mom at Geisel’s White Coat Ceremony last fall.

country’s first black military aviators during WWII, the Tuskegee Airmen). “He advised me to take advantage of every educational and professional opportunity available to me when I joined the Marine Corps shortly after graduating from high school, only a few weeks after the 9/11 terrorist attacks,” he says.

Lewis served in the Marines from 2001-07, completing a combat tour in Iraq’s notorious “Triangle of Death” in 2004-05. “My experiences in Iraq forced me to come face-to-face with my own mortality at a very early age,” says Lewis. “I believe that awareness put a lot of important things into perspective for me.”

When Staff Sergeant Paul Risotti, a close friend who served with Lewis, suggested they pursue a degree together, he was able to overcome some deep-seated doubts about his abilities as a student—eventually earning a degree in electronics from Southern Illinois University through a military tuition assistance program while still on active duty in 2007.

After leaving the Marines, Lewis worked for Boeing and AT&T as a tower climber and field engineer, but felt unfulfilled. “I didn’t feel the sense of purpose I wanted out of life,” he recalls. “After a lot of soul-searching, I felt a strong desire to leave a positive impact on the world through my life’s work. I decided that a career in medicine would give me the best opportunity to do that.”

In 2011, Lewis began taking premedical courses at the University of Arizona where he met another important mentor, Dr. Richard

Carmona, the 17th Surgeon General of the U.S., whose background and path to medicine were very similar to Lewis’, and who provided him with invaluable guidance and inspiration.

Later, while working for Carmona at the Canyon Ranch Institute (a public health non-profit), Lewis gained real-world experience conducting research and leading health promotion projects including urban farming in low-income, medically underserved communities. To enhance his preparation for medicine, he also completed a Masters in Public Health at George Washington University.

“At Geisel, there are so many different ways people can find their niche, take a leadership role, and make things happen,” says Lewis, who is involved in student government and Urban Health Scholars, and serves on the Geisel Diversity Council and National Board of Directors for the Student National Medical Association.

While Lewis isn’t yet sure which area of medicine he will focus on, his long-term goals are to practice in underserved communities while continuing to be a leader in the fields of public health and veterans’ health. “Most of all, I want to help disadvantaged youth succeed through mentoring,” says Lewis, who was proud to have Grant and Risotti at Geisel’s White Coat Ceremony last fall, “just as the mentors in my life helped me.”

TIM DEAN