

SATURDAY ACADEMY STRENGTHENS THE DENTAL PIPELINE FOR UNDERREPRESENTED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS



Dr. Cheryline Pezzullo



Dr. Lorel Burns

In October 2012, Dr. Lorel Burns, Class of 2015, was selected by NYUCD to be a student “ambassador” to an ADA-sponsored meeting entitled “Increasing Diversity to Eliminate Disparities,” which was part of the ADA annual session in San Francisco. Student representatives from dental schools across the country attended the meeting.

The meeting’s emphasis was on strengthening the “pipeline” approach to recruiting underrepresented young people to dentistry. The pipeline concept holds that by providing for successive—and successful—transitions for members of underrepresented groups across educational milestones, society will increase its stock of educated citizens and enhance the public good. In dental education, this equates to increasing enrollment of underrepresented minorities in dental schools as a means of expanding access to care. To put it another way, dental institutions can best address the access-to-care issue by recruiting and admitting more underrepresented students who will go on to provide care for communities in need.

The consensus among attendees at the San Francisco meeting was that high school students were not being significantly encouraged and supported to enter the pipeline because of lack of awareness of dentistry as a career option, lack of resources, and lack of mentorship.

NYUCD has long had programs that target both middle school and college students as prospective applicants, but there had not been a focus on high school students. On her return to NYUCD, Dr. Burns enlisted her classmate, Dr. Cheryline Pezzullo, ’15, to create a program that would strengthen NYUCD’s pipeline for high school students. Dr. Mark Makling, ’15, was also instrumental in the Academy’s founding.

Drs. Burns, Pezzullo, and Makling contacted guidance counselors throughout the New York metropolitan area to recruit high school students and the result was the establishment in fall 2013 of “Saturday Academy,” a preparatory program for low-income, underrepresented high school students.

The 2013 Saturday Academy began with 15 underrepresented high school students; in 2014, there were 26 students from a pool of 50 applicants. Students attend sessions two Saturdays a month from September through December.

“The Academy has really taken off,” said Dr. Pezzullo, “with members of the first class telling their friends about it, and, in effect, marketing the program for us.”

Saturday Academy is sponsored in full by the NYUCD Student Council. At each session, students are provided with breakfast and lunch and five volunteers from NYUCD student clubs plus a core group of volunteers guide the participants through each step in the college application process and also introduce the students to various aspects of dentistry, including providing them with hands-on training. For example, participants learn to fabricate mouth guards, fill predrilled teeth using typodonts, and remove simulated plaque, also using typodonts. Core volunteers have included Dr. Vladimir Avril, '15, Dr. Leon Johnson, '15, Ms. Carmine Pena, '16, and Mr. Blake Adams, '17.

"You see their eyes light up when they understand the options they can have as



Saturday Academy co-founders, Dr. Cheryline Pezzullo, lower left, and Dr. Lorel Burns, second from right, along with other NYU dental students, give Saturday Academy members a tour of the simulation lab.

dentists—the various specialties that are open to them," added Dr. Burns.

Drs. Burns and Pezzullo have secured donations for Academy participants that include a Kaplan course for SAT preparation, electric toothbrushes, and college prep books. Financial aid advice is provided to students and their parents.

"The program's primary objectives," said Dr. Burns, "are to introduce the students to the profession of dentistry and to teach them about the college application process. But we also edit résumés and college essays. One of our greatest joys was helping with a college essay and writing a letter of recommendation for a student who received a full-tuition scholarship to attend NYU."

With Drs. Burns, Pezzullo, and Makling having graduated, Ms. Pena has assumed a leadership role in the Academy.

"One of the things that made us happiest," said Dr. Pezzullo, "was that several of the students have expressed a desire to return as volunteers. I can't imagine a better example of the pipeline concept."