

Doctor's program aims to boost minority representation in medicine

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Dexter Frederick stood inside an administrative office at Tampa's Grace Community Health Center recently, a poster of the periodic table of elements hovering above his shoulders.

Morgan Butts, a University of South Florida doctorate student, stood in the doorway with a clipboard in hand.

"How many days do you want to treat it?" asked Frederick, who has been a doctor for more than 20 years. "Let's go with 10."

Together, they rattled off a list of prescriptions.

"How many milligrams?" Butts asked.

"0.4," Frederick replied. The patient will need 34 tablets to get him through the treatment. If the fever increases or the pain gets worse, they discuss, he'll need to go to the emergency room.

"Any questions?"

"I don't think so."

Every day, Frederick, 51, gives his students doses of real-world medical experience, gentle nudges and assertive guidance mixed with opportunities to find the answers themselves.

Since 2004, he has been supporting minority students who dream of becoming doctors through a program he founded called Brain Expansions Scholastic Training, or B.E.S.T.

In 17 years, the Tampa program has supported around 3,000 students and provided more than \$20,000 in scholarships, according to its website. They partner with a number of local institutions including the Moffitt Cancer Center and the University of South Florida College of Nursing.

This fall, he was recognized as a 2022 AARP Purpose Prize fellow, an award that honors people over 50 years old who are using their knowledge to address social issues. It includes \$10,000 to further his organization's mission as well as a year of technical support to broaden

the scope of the work.

Brain Expansions Scholastic Training aims to address the lack of diversity among [health care providers](#) by inspiring and educating youth in underrepresented groups with a passion for medicine.

For the students, the intangible boosts in confidence and sense of community within the program have made their dreams feel achievable.

"My vision is that my presence as an African American physician will be triple, quadruple fold," he said, "where millions of patients throughout the U.S., especially Tampa, will have a better, healthier life—reducing disparities, increasing trust."

'I loved to study the bones'

In seventh grade, intense knee pain landed Frederick in the emergency room. There, he began to admire how the Black male physician who took care of him looked at X-ray film and reassured him he'd eventually recover.

Frederick had Osgood-Schlatter disease, which causes knee pain among growing children and adolescents. A cast was bound to his leg from his hip to his ankle for weeks.

"From that point, I loved to study the bones," he said. After his first job inside a hospital in ninth grade, he'd spend every summer there. He left high school able to name every bone in the body.

As he pursued medical school, Frederick uncovered his love for internal medicine and pediatrics. As a scholar with the National Health Service Corps, which offers students [financial support](#) in exchange for service in communities of need, he came to East Tampa after school.

"I got to see patients who did not fill their meds because they had to pay their rent or kids who did not come in for breathing treatment because of lack of transportation," he said.

That's when he began to realize the importance of patients having the option to see physicians from similar racial and cultural backgrounds.

"Sometimes if you don't have a physician that looks like you, talks like you, understands the culture," he said, "there's some distrust, sometimes there's a delay in treatment."

One goal for the Brain Expansions Scholastic Training program is to develop students who enter medicine with an understanding of social determinants of health, or how factors like housing, food availability, public safety and education that impact quality of life.

"The idea is that they will be more compassionate, more culturally competent," Frederick said.

According to the most recent statistics from the Association of American Medical Colleges, only 5 percent of practicing physicians are Black and 6 percent are Hispanic. More than half are white, the 2018 data shows.

Only 36 percent of physicians are female.

Historically, a significant portion of Black physicians were trained at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, but as the number of institutions decreased, the path to a career in medicine has become less clear for aspiring Black physicians.

Nearly a quarter of Black medical school graduates were attaining degrees from HBCUs in the late 1970s, according to the Association of

American Medical Colleges. In 2019, less than 10 percent were.

Frederick hopes his program is chipping away at the lack of representation by offering students images of people who look like them practicing in their desired specialty while also offering them a concrete pathway through real-world training.

For many minority students, the medical school entrance exam is a stopping point, Frederick said.

"Some African American students may take it once and give up," he said. "Why? Because they don't have that mentor to say go for it or they don't have the financial support to take test prep or there's another major that's treating them better or giving them more opportunities."

His program and mentorship aim to reverse that: "We need to demystify what it means to become a doctor."

Seeing Black medical professionals

Lavette Jones, 17, has wanted to become a doctor since she was a little girl.

"I want to become a surgeon, but how is it going to happen?" she wondered. "I've never even seen anyone like me in the field."

That changed when she joined the Brain Expansions Scholastic Training program where she started seeing Black medical professionals.

Still, she's intimidated about entering a white male-dominated field. Being looked down upon not only because she's a woman but because she's Black fuels doubts.

"I'm doubting myself already and I haven't even started," said Jones. "The pressure is so great to become what I've always wanted to be."

She recalls meeting a girl who said she wanted to be a physician's assistant, but after talking more, Jones realized the girl really aspired to be a medical doctor but was discouraged by the time it would take to secure a degree. Then, she had a meeting with Frederick to discuss her options.

Although Frederick may not change every student's mind, he sees those conversations as opportunities to brainstorm solutions to roadblocks, particularly for students of color.

Nastassia Percy is studying for the medical school admission test, or MCAT. She plans to sit for the exam next spring. Her interest in medicine solidified in [high school](#) working with the athletic training staff. Learning about and treating sports injuries sparked the 19-year-old soccer and track athlete's interest.

"Every day I'm more and more into it," said Percy.

She worries about competing for a spot in [medical school](#) and wonders if her race and gender will work against her. Knowing other Black women and [minority students](#) are pursuing medicine puts her mind at ease.

"I'm not the only one who's about to struggle," she jokes. But she knows herself, she said, if she puts her mind to it, she'll do it. For now, Percy is interested in both orthopedic sports medicine and anesthesiology and is studying biomedical sciences at the University of South Florida.

The vast majority of anesthesiologists—about 70 percent—are white. Orthopedic medicine has a similar outlook.

"It's a little intimidating," said Percy. "But I won't let it make me back down."

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