

# PARTNERS

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*20th Class of Rural Medical Scholars Enters Program*

*Fall 2015*

## Two Decades of Rural Medical Scholars Help Meet State Need



The twentieth class in the Rural Medical Scholars Program (RMSP) entered the program in August just as the 15th RMS class to graduate from medical school entered residency training. The RS XX class, above with this year's Rural Community Health Scholars, are (front) Anooshah Ata, Jackson County; Helen Cunningham, Baldwin County; Carson Perrella, Lee County; Gloria (Storm) McWhorter, Montgomery County; Harriet Washington, Pickens County. (back) Caleb Mason, Marshall County; Johnny Pate, Hale County; John Pounders, Colbert County; Jayla Robinson, Winston County; Tanner Hallman, Marshall County; Dylan Drinkard, Clarke County; Jeremy Watson, Tuscaloosa County.

### RMSP —“Growing Our Own” Rural Doctors

Moulton, Autaugaville, Jasper, Cullman, Greeneville, Jackson, Greensboro, and Winfield all have hometown doctors who went away to medical school and came back home as family physicians. These communities have benefited from The University of Alabama Rural Medical Scholars Program, which was established in 1996 to help rural Alabama students do that very thing – go home to practice or to a similar rural area of the state that needs a primary medical care doctor.

Family physicians **Chad McElroy** (Moulton); **Lee Carter** (Autaugaville); **Ty Blackwell** (Jasper); **Neil Yeager** (Cullman); **Brandon Slagley** (Greeneville), **Ashley Coleman** (Jackson); **Dana Todd** (Greensboro), and **Brent Ballard** (Winfield) all met their goal of becoming a rural doctor and went home to practice, using the RMSP as a resource. Other RMS grads have returned

*(Continued on page 2.)*

### Rural Medical Scholar Rick Jotani Gives Back

Rick Jotani, MD, Diplomate, ABFM, CAQ Sports Medicine, has pledged \$50,000 to the Rural Medical Scholars Program at CCHS. Dr. Jotani, a family physician in Pell City, Alabama, is a graduate of the Rural Medical Scholars Program.

“The main reason I wanted to make a contribution to the RMSP was because the program was so instrumental in helping me becoming a physician,” said Jotani, who serves as



the team doctor for Pell City High School. “It guided me into primary care and helped mold me into the family physician I am today.”

“As a professor, it is highly satisfying to see our students reach professional milestones— building families, becoming community leaders, and growing practices to self-sufficiency and philanthropy,” said Dr. John Wheat, Professor of Community & Rural Medicine, founder and

director of RMSP. “It is especially gratifying to see those like Rick reinvesting in the RMSP. It is gift support like this that helps create a stable foundation for continued growth in the RMSP and related rural medical education.”

Members of Dr. Rick Jotani’s community have described how much he means to Pell City and St. Clair County. Dr. Michael Barber, superintendent of Pell City Schools, calls Dr. Jotani “an inspiration to our entire staff and one of the greatest friends our school system could ever have.”

“He seeks out those in need and then meets their need,” Barber explains. “He is leading the charge in educating staff on prevention of injuries on the field of competition and is assisting our administration in developing policies to support the health of our students. He has a true servant’s heart in providing for his patients and community.”

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# Rural Medical Scholars Helping Meet Need for Rural Doctors

their home counties, including Dr. **Beverly Jordan** of Jack, Alabama, who went back to Coffee County and is a family medicine/sports medicine physician in Enterprise; Choctaw County native **Lee Armistead**, now in family practice in Gilberttown after rural-based training at home in Butler; and RMS **Mandi Allen-Bell** of Rosalie, now a family doctor in Scottsboro in her home county (Jackson).

“Growing Our Own” is a tenet of the Rural Medical Scholars Program and other Rural Scholars Programs at The University of Alabama and is based on research that shows that rural students are more likely to choose to live and practice in rural areas,” says Dr. **John Wheat**, director of the RMSP.

Of the 199 rural Alabama students who have entered The University of Alabama Rural Medical Scholars Program since it was founded in 1996, the RMSP has seen seventy percent of its graduates enter primary care fields. More than 60% of Rural Medical Scholars who have finished training and started practice are working in rural areas of Alabama. Ninety percent of RMS graduates practice in Alabama. Though a few of them practice in Alabama cities and some have entered specialties such as surgery, cardiology, and radiology, the RMSP is meeting its goals to provide rural primary care doctors for the state.

The Rural Medical Scholars Program (RMSP) is the culmination of a successful and nationally known ‘pipeline’ for rural Alabama students which has been *growing our own* doctors for more than twenty years. The Pipeline was recognized as the 2013 Outstanding Rural Health Program by the National Rural Health Association.

Some Rural Medical Scholars do enter practice in rural areas of the state away from home, like Dr. **Frannie Koe** who chose to set up her practice in Collinsville, which had been without a primary care physician for a number of years, or Leroy native Dr. **Clifton Garriss**, a family physician who provides obstetrical care in Sylacauga. They continue their commitment to provide primary medical care for Alabamians in the patients’ home community, the premise upon which they based their applications to enter the Rural Medical Scholars.

“If it weren’t for RMSP I wouldn’t be in the position that I am...doing what I dreamed, caring for patients, and helping families,” said Dr. Garriss.

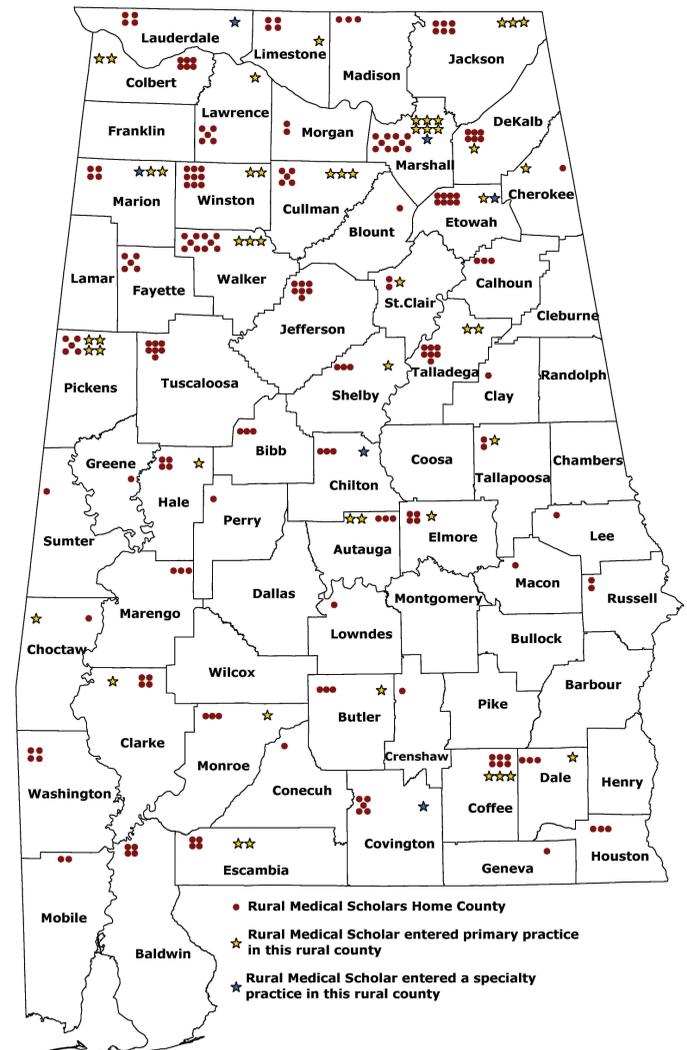
## Dr. Jotani

Joanna Murphree, whose daughter, Ryan, is on the high school’s varsity soccer team and interested in becoming a certified athletic trainer, says, “Dr. Jotani interacts and relates so well with these students, and he encourages them to work hard and achieve their goals. He expresses a genuine interest in both their academic performances and athletic accomplishments as well. Dr. Jotani has taken time away from his active practice to provide free sports physicals for athletes to participate in the high school sport programs.”

Martha Mitcham, a member of administrative staff at Pell City Schools says, “From the standpoint of a parent and grandparent of athletes in the Pell City School System, it has been a tremendous advantage to have a local doctor that the athletes see on a regular basis in our rural community to be

“RMSP was a wonderful start to a special rural medical career. The friends, mentors, and colleagues I gained through the program are invaluable,” said **Beverly Jordan**, Rural Medical Scholar who served as president and later board chairman for the Alabama Academy of Family Physicians.

## Home Counties and Rural Practice Sites



on the field with them. Dr. Jotani is very generous and caring and children know when people are genuinely interested in them. It was a good day in Pell City when Dr. Jotani decided to come to our small town.”

Dr. Jotani’s practice is also an economic boon to the area. His office employs twenty people. “That’s 20 individuals who pay taxes and contribute to the economy via their spending,” he says. Experts estimate that a rural physician provides more than a million dollar per year impact on a local economy.

Curtis Eddy, Pharm.D., who owns Ashville, Odenville, and Main Street Drugs, says, “Dr. Jotani has made a huge impact on the medical services, not only in the Pell City area, but throughout St Clair County. His afterhours clinic provides care for our patients when other physician have gone home.”

# Rural Caucus Chair David Standridge Meets Rural Scholars

State Representative David Standridge from Blount County met with several Rural Medical Scholars and other Rural Scholars in the Pipeline during a visit to the Rural Programs Offices at CCHS on Tuesday, July 7. The Pipeline includes programs for Alabama's rural students in high school, college and medical school. Representative Standridge is Chairman of the Rural Caucus in the State Legislature. The Caucus is a bi-partisan group of 40 state legislators who represent rural districts of the state.

Students told Standridge how they became interested in medicine or health care as a career and how the program had helped them to prepare for college and professional training. Discussion turned to the health care needs of rural areas in the state, particularly the need for more doctors and other health care providers in these underserved areas.

Standridge hopes to introduce Rural Scholars to Rural Caucus members to increase their awareness of how the programs benefit these rural Alabama students and its impact on future health care for families across the state. Rep. Standridge said the Rural Caucus encouraged him to make the visit to learn more about The University of Alabama Rural Medical Scholars Program and to explore options to enhance the recruitment and training of primary care doctors for the benefit of residents of rural Alabama.

At the meeting, Rep. Standridge and his wife, Danna, met with Dr. John Wheat, Professor of Community and Rural Medicine and Director of the Rural Scholars Programs in the College of Community Health Sciences at The University of Alabama, and interacted with staff and students in the program to learn more about the group's impact on rural communities. They also learned about the great need for primary care physicians in our rural areas.



Rural Caucus Chairman David Standridge greets Ivy Weaver, a Rural Student Assistant, during his visit to the UA Rural Scholars Programs on July 7.

After the meeting Rep. Standridge stated, "One of the most valuable pieces of information I received from the meeting was the economic impact of a physician locating in rural Alabama. It is documented that there is a direct economic impact of a million dollars a year to that local community from a single doctor. In addition to the health and welfare of our citizens, economic development is a focus of the Rural Caucus, so this program targets two of our main priorities."

"More than 50 physicians who are products of the Rural Medical Scholars Program now practice in rural Alabama," said Dr. John Brandon. "Each dollar invested in the Rural Scholars programs by the Legislature has yielded \$48 in rural economic development in addition to the increased access to medical care for rural citizens."

"As a citizen of rural Alabama and as Chairman of the Rural Caucus, I applaud and support the Rural Scholars Programs and will advocate for the continued support of this program with my constituents in the House of Representatives," said Standridge in a July 10 news release. "I am happy to support groups who work tirelessly toward the common goal of improving life for the residents of rural Alabama."



Rural Medical Scholars Danny Seale (Hale County), Nicholas Darby (Lauderdale County), and Scott Thomas (Houston County); Cynthia Moore, Assistant Director of Rural Scholars Programs; Dr. John Wheat and Rep. Standridge (both standing); Dr. John Brandon, RMSP Medical Director; Taylor Sims, a 2011 Rural Health Scholar and 2012 Rural Minority Health Scholar from Monroe County, and Pickens County Health Scholars, Andrew Strong and Ashley Birmingham.

## PARTNERS for Rural Health



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Increasing numbers of rural students entering health professions and preparing them for rural health careers is the focus of Rural Health programs in the Dept. of Community & Rural Medicine and the UA College of Community Health Sciences—a branch of the University of Alabama School of Medicine.

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### RMS Family Docs Grads Enter Rural Practice

Three Rural Medical Scholars, June graduates of The University of Alabama Family Medicine Residency, have joined 55 of their RMS peers who have entered practice in rural Alabama communities. **John Adams** is now a family physician in Alexander City in Coosa County.

**Holly McCaleb** has joined her childhood family physician, Dr. Jerry Harrison, in practice in her hometown, Haleyville; and Dr. **Greg Robbins**, from Pickens County, is now a family doctor in Carrollton. The three each received an RMSP award for achievement at the 40th Annual Residency Graduation on June 21, at which McCaleb also won the research award.

### RMSs Seek Fellowship Training at CCHS

CCHS Chief Resident **Hunter Russell**, a Rural Medical Scholar (RMS) from St. Clair County, graduated from the FM Residency at CCHS in June and will complete a sports medicine fellowship at the college this year with Dr. James Robinson, CCHS endowed chair of Sports Medicine. Fellows work with University of Alabama teams and local high school athletes. RMS Dr. **Alexis Mason**, from Town Creek, AL, who just completed family medicine training in Tennessee, is also back as a Fellow in Behavioral Health. “This fellowship trains family physicians, particularly those who plan to enter rural practice, in treating common psychiatric problems,” said fellowship director Dr. Marisa Giggie. “Fellows spend three days a week at rural sites and do brief psychotherapy.”

### Vines Receives William R. Willard Award

Elmore County Rural Scholar and CCHS family medicine resident **Justin Vines**, MD, was presented with the 2015 William R. Willard Award. The residents and Family Medicine faculty vote on the Award, which recognizes the first-year resident whose professional competence and characteristics best exemplify a model family physician. Dr. Vines was a Rural Health Scholar as an 11th grader and became a Rural Medical Scholar in his senior year at UA.

### Dr. Koe Recognized for “Living Democracy”

Rural Medical Scholar Dr. **Frannie Koe**, a CCHS medical student and residency alumna, was featured as part of the Auburn University “Living Democracy Citizenship” series by an AU student doing an internship in Collinsville. Crystal Rawls called Dr. Koe “a doctor who believes in spending time with her patients” and “even makes house calls.” Koe “works to make the community a better place,” said Rawls, making her “a deserving recipient of the 2015 Living Democracy Citizenship Award.” See: [www.cla.auburn.edu/livingdemocracy/](http://www.cla.auburn.edu/livingdemocracy/).

### Ruffin Receives White Coat at P.A. School

**Cedric Ruffin** of Pushmataha, a CCHS Rural Health Scholar and Rural Minority Scholar from Choctaw County, recently received his physician assistant “White Coat” at Mississippi College. Cedric earned his master’s degree as a Rural Community Health Scholar at CCHS and served as a graduate research assistant at Nott Hall.