

Graduation Celebration 2012

Keck School graduates receive lifelong advice at 2012 commencement

By Amy E. Hamaker

Keck School of Medicine of USC student Ronen Kalay stood in a long line with the rest of his classmates in a side wing of the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium on May 12, waiting for his commencement ceremony to begin. “I feel like it’s just the start of the road, and we have a long way ahead of us,” said Kalay, who will soon begin his residency at Huntington Memorial Hospital in surgery. “I’m a little anxious, but definitely excited!”

That buzz of excitement and anxiety charged the air in the large auditorium as nearly 2,500 guests watched the Keck School class of 2012 proceed down the side aisle as the ceremony began. The class included 171 M.D. graduates, with five of them receiving a combined M.D./Ph.D. degree.

How these graduates will proceed in their careers as medical practitioners was a theme for the afternoon, and commencement speakers had a variety of solid advice to give the graduates.

Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito counseled them on the importance of seeing the larger picture. “Most of you entered our school as generalists, in the sense that you were broadly focused on the whole person and interest in the big picture of medicine, with all its complexities,” he said. “As you continue your journey through the practice of medicine, keep the big picture in mind. If the advances of the several decades that preceded us continue, this cohort of physicians will have unparalleled ability to diagnose and treat disease and extend life.”

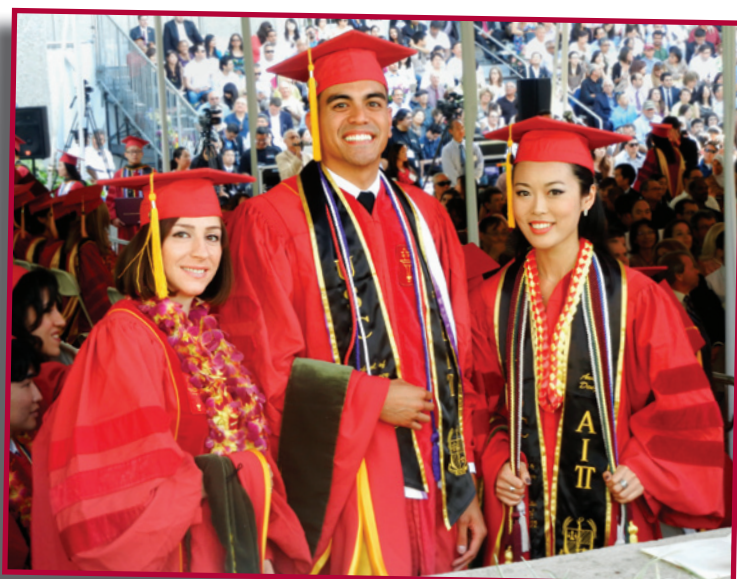
Elizabeth Garrett, USC provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, who served as presiding officer, also emphasized a broad view of medicine with a focus on the patient. “Your passion to help and comfort others is now your responsibility,” she said. “Above all, your profession focuses on the human being,

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Lisa Brook

Keck School of Medicine graduate Misha Heller celebrates with brother Justin Heller following the May 12 commencement ceremony at the Shrine Auditorium.



Kukla Vera

Above, USC School of Pharmacy graduates Lusine Dishgrikyan, Mark Dimapawi, and Anna Qinzhe Deng gather for their ceremony. Above right, occupational therapist Xiao Yi (Nikki) Ow displays her master's degree. Right, E. Todd Schroeder, assistant professor of research in the Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy, hoods Alexandra Leigh Hindson, a doctor of physical therapy graduate.

Health Sciences campus fetes newest graduates from a range of disciplines

By Amy E. Hamaker

A number of commencement ceremonies dotted the USC landscape this month on both the University Park and Health Sciences campuses:

USC Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

The division graduated 183 candidates, including 23 who received Bachelor of Science degrees; 126 who received Master of Arts degrees; 32 who received Doctor of Occupational Therapy degrees; and two who received a Ph.D. in Occupational Science.

Ronnie Chan, USC trustee and chairman of Hang Lung

Group Limited and Hang Lung Properties Limited, encouraged graduates to consider working abroad to bring occupational therapy to countries like China, where the profession is still not widely recognized, but greatly needed.

USC Division of Biokinesiology and Physical Therapy

The division graduated 99 candidates; of those, 92 received Doctor of Physical Therapy degrees; two received Master of Science in Biokinesiology degrees; and five received a Ph.D. in Biokinesiology.

Commencement speaker



Matt Sandusky

Bill Shumard, president and CEO of Special Olympics, Southern California, shared with the graduates his philosophy on why we work with passion: “The third most important reason we work is for money. The second is because we respect whom we work for. The most important reason we work is for the hope of being part of something greater than ourselves.”

Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC

The school graduated 250 candidates total, including 170 who received Doctor of Dental Surgery degrees; 32 who received Bachelor

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Hospital employees boost Good Neighbors Campaign

By Tania Chatila and Alan House

The University can always count on the USC hospitals to be good neighbors.

Continuing their tradition of giving, employees of Keck Hospital of USC and USC Norris Cancer Hospital raised \$68,000 for the 2011 Good Neighbors Campaign, and hospital administrators matched that contribution with an additional \$68,000 organizational gift. The total hospitals pledge of \$136,000 gave the campaign the push it needed to raise a record \$1.5 million.

“We are extremely grateful to the USC hospitals for their continued support each year to this very important cause,” said Tom Sayles, senior vice president of University Relations at USC. “We met our fundraising goal in large measure because of the generosity of the hospital employees. That speaks volumes about their whole-hearted commitment to civic engagement.”

The contributions came late last October, when the campaign had not quite reached its goal.

“We at the Keck Medical Center are fully committed and dedicated to the well-being of our neighbors,” said Scott Evans, interim chief executive officer and chief operating officer of Keck Hospital of USC and USC Norris Cancer Hospital. “Our contribution seemed not only fitting but imperative given the challenging economic situation that many faced last year.”

The hospitals have been contributing to the Good Neighbors Campaign since they became part of the Trojan Family a little more than

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Keck School of Medicine honors philanthropist Selim Zilkha

By Ina Fried
 Businessman and philanthropist Selim Zilkha received the Elaine Stevely Hoffman Award May 12 during commencement ceremonies for the Keck School of Medicine of USC.
 “The Elaine Stevely Hoffman Award is given each year to an individual for extraordinary service, outstanding contributions and unwavering dedication to the Keck School of Medicine of USC. Selim Zilka is such an individual,” said Keck School Dean Carmen A. Puliafito in presenting the award.
 “He is a forward thinking, imaginative, successful entrepreneur who cares deeply about the human condition,” Puliafito said.

“He is still intimately involved with the Zikha Neurogenetic Institute so it will serve in perpetuity as an important peer-disciplinary hub for the study of degenerative neurological diseases.”
 Zilkha’s founding gift of \$20 million in 2002 helped to create the Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute at the Keck School. A member of the Keck School Board of Overseers, he reaffirmed his commitment in 2011 with a \$5 million gift for recruitment of senior scientists and investigators to the institute.
 An owner in Zilkha Biomass Fuels, Zilkha is known for the breadth of his vision both as an innovative and successful entrepreneur



Keck School of Medicine Dean Carmen A. Puliafito congratulates Selim Zilkha on receiving the Elaine Stevely Hoffman Award.

and as a medical benefactor.
 From 1998 to 2005, Zilkha, a pioneer in new technologies in the energy industry, was director and 50 percent owner of Zilkha Renewable Energy, now known as Horizon Wind Energy. He

was previously a director of El Paso Corporation and of Sonat Inc. He served as the chief executive officer and sole director of Zilkha Energy Company from 1983 until January 1998.
 Zilkha’s first venture was Mothercare, PLC, a retail chain catering to mothers-to-be and small children in Great Britain, Europe and the United States. He founded the company in 1960 and was chairman and managing director until he sold his interest in 1982.
 The award is named in memory of Elaine Stevely Hoffman, a Los Angeles philanthropist who contributed to building a research center on the USC Health Sciences campus.

COMMENCEMENT: Health Sciences campus mints graduates, celebrates their accomplishments

Continued from page 1
 of Science degrees in Dental Hygiene; 44 who received Advanced Specialty Certificates*; 11 who received Master of Science degrees*; and three who received a Ph.D. (*10 graduates received both a Master of Science degree and an Advanced Specialty Certificate.)
 Avishai Sadan, dean of the Ostrow School of Dentistry, told his graduates, “This ceremony marks the completion of an intense and

incredibly demanding time in your life, but it also heralds the beginning of so much more. Today celebrates your entry into the profession of dentistry, one of the most trusted professions in the world, and you do so as a member of the Trojan Dental Family.”
 John Robinson, former USC and NFL football coach, delivered the keynote address, sharing anecdotes from his 40-year history with USC and what the phrase “Fight On” means to him. “I look at

‘Fight On,’ and I know what it means. As you go through life, you’re going to get it,” Robinson said. “‘Fight On’ has a whispered ‘I got your back’ behind it.”
USC School of Pharmacy
 The school awarded a variety of degrees to 232 graduates, including 189 Doctor of Pharmacy degrees (among these recipients, there were four joint/dual degrees: one Pharm.D./MBA; two Pharm.D./M.S. in Regulatory Science; and

one Pharm.D. Certificate in Gerontology); Ph.D.s in Molecular Pharmacology (four), Pharmaceutical Economics & Policy (one) and Pharmaceutical Sciences (seven); four Doctor of Regulatory Science degrees; master’s degrees in Regulatory Science (17), Pharmaceutical Economics & Policy (two) and Pharmaceutical Sciences (eight); 31 Resident certificates; and six Fellowship certificates.
 Virginia Herold, executive

officer of the California State Board of Pharmacy, offered the commencement address. She encouraged the graduates to “get out there and take care of patients.”
 Associate professor Cynthia Lieu thanked family and friends who have supported graduates in so many ways on their paths to this culminating moment of achievement. Susie Park, an assistant professor, administered the pharmacy oath at the end of the ceremony.

KECK SCHOOL: Entering the Shrine Auditorium as students, but leaving as physicians

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 often in the most difficult times of his or her life. You are not simply doctors with a mastery of facts; you are lifelong learners with broad perspectives and a keen eye to the fluidity of the future.”
 Nadine Gracia, acting

deputy assistant secretary for minority health and acting director of the Office of Minority Health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, talked about opportunities—including those she received through her own mentor, Henri Ford,

Keck School vice dean for medical education, during their time at the University of Pittsburgh Medical School.
 “Some people believe that opportunities only come to those who are lucky,” Gracia explained. “I believe that opportunities are both made

and given. ... There are policies that are being formed, rules that are being written and decisions that have not yet been made. See your patients as people; embrace your role in the community. We need your experience, your understanding and your leadership. You can reach out as others have reached out to you, because medicine is truly a team sport.”
 And although student speaker Alexander Melamed, an M.D. graduate headed to Brigham and Women’s Hospital for a residency in obstetrics and gynecology, imparted a variety of life’s lessons he had learned during his time in medical school, his most heartfelt advice was inspired by a quote from rapper Tupac Shakur: “I did not choose the [doctor’s] life; the [doctor’s] life chose me.”
 The Shrine Auditorium wasn’t the only place where Keck School graduates received beneficial advice. Several other Keck School commencement ceremonies took place on both the Health Sciences and University Park campuses.

On May 9 at a ceremony held at the Harry and Celesta Pappas Quad on the Health Sciences campus, 93 Keck School graduates received Master of Science degrees, 29 were awarded a Ph.D., and 87 received Master of Public Health degrees.
 On May 11, the USC Primary Care Physician Assistant Program had a total of 45 graduates who received Master of Physician Assistant Practice degrees at a ceremony held on the lawn southwest of the Allan Hancock Foundation Building at the University Park campus. The students will take the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam over the next few months.
 Also on May 11, the Health Promotion & Disease Prevention Studies Program awarded 67 degrees for Health Promotion and eight degrees for Global Health during a commencement ceremony held at Town and Gown at the University Park Campus.
 To view the complete list of Keck School senior and faculty award recipients, visit <http://tinyurl.com/6uweuw6>.

TheWeekly

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Keck School Dean’s Research Scholars chosen

By Amy E. Hamaker
Keck School of Medicine of USC Dean Carmen A. Puliafito recently announced that 10 new students will join the ranks of the prestigious Dean’s Research Scholars. The Dean’s Research Scholars (DRS) Program provides medical students with an opportunity to take a full year to pursue a research experience with either a Keck School faculty member or an approved USC faculty member outside of the Keck School.

The program is open to any student in good academic standing who has completed his or her second year of medical school. There are a limited number of scholarships; students may also join the program if their project is approved and funding can be identified from their mentor or from an outside source approved by the Keck School.

For the 2012/13 academic year, eight students will receive funding:

- Ali Arastu, “Analysis of Health Policy and Barriers to Care on Skid Row” (from Eastern Sierras, Calif.; faculty mentor: Michael R. Cousineau, associate professor of research, division of community health family medicine)
- Elizabeth Joiner, “Progression of Scoliosis After Skeletal Maturity” (from Edina, Minn.; faculty mentor: David Skaggs, professor of orthopaedic surgery)
- Nikhil Kamat, “Control of Intrarenal Synthesis and Salt Transporters by the Novel Metabolic Receptor GPR91” (from Chicago, Ill.; faculty mentor: Alicia McDonough, professor, cell & neurobiology)
- Jarrad Merriman, “Serum Interleukin-6 as a Marker of Periprosthetic Shoulder Infection” (from Bakersfield, Calif.; faculty mentor:

George F. Hatch III, assistant professor of clinical medicine)

- Lauren Nosanov, “Integration of Full-Body, Low-Dosage, Digital X-Ray (Lodox/Statscan) into Trauma Protocol at a Level One Trauma Center” (from Glen Head, N.Y.; faculty mentor: Kenji Inaba, visiting assistant professor of clinical surgery)
- Isaac Schmale, “Enhanced Cetuximab Sensitivity by Inhibiting β -Catenin/CBP Signaling in Head and Neck Squamous Cell Carcinoma (HNSCC)” (from Santa Cruz, Calif.; faculty mentor: Uttam K. Sinha, assistant professor and vice chairman, otolaryngology)
- Derek Seehausen, “Quality of Life Assessment in Adults with Birth Brachial Plexus Palsy” (from West Chester, Penn.; faculty mentor: David Skaggs)
- Matthew Webb, “CSF-1 Blockade Inhibits Monocyte-Induced Neuroblastoma Growth and Enhances Chemotherapy” (from Simi Valley, Calif.; faculty mentor: Robert Seeger, professor of pediatrics)

In addition, two students will be funded from external sources:

- Michael Weintraub, (from Castro Valley, Calif.; at the National Institutes of Health)
- Rishu Gupta (from San Diego, Calif.; at the UC San Francisco Department of Dermatology; mentor: John Koo, professor of clinical dermatology, UCSF.)

“Some students do not want to complete a Ph.D., but want a more in-depth research experience, and that is where the Dean’s Research Scholar Program plays an important role,” said David R. Hinton, the Gavin S. Herbert Professor of Retinal Research and a professor of pathology and ophthalmology at the Keck School, who is the new director of the DRS program.



Members of the Dean’s Research Scholars Program include (from left): Nikhil Kamat, Matthew Webb, Lauren Nosanov, Elizabeth Joiner, Isaac Schmale and Jarrad Merriman.

Jon Natlick

“These students are given the opportunity to spend a full year working on a focused research project in the laboratory of a Keck School faculty member to gain research skills, publish scholarly articles and often to present their work at national meetings,” he explained. “Having such an experience prepares them for further research after graduation and provides support for the development of an academic medical career.”



Tania Chatila

From left, Scott Evans, hospitals COO and interim CEO; Tom Sayles, senior vice president for University Relations; Lindsey Lawrence, hospitals executive assistant; and Gina Greco, nursing director of evidence-based practice, pose with a \$68,000 check from Keck Hospital of USC and USC Norris Cancer Hospital administration to the USC Good Neighbors Campaign.

GNC: Campaign raises \$1.5 million

Continued from page 1
three years ago. At a special check presentation held recently at the hospitals, Evans and Sayles thanked employees for their gifts and recognized hospital campaign leaders Lindsey Lawrence, Gina Greco and Bill Gorenstein for rallying their colleagues.

“The work that we do at the hospitals is often stressful, but the people who work here are so generous and caring,” said Lawrence. “As campaign leader, I got to be an integral part of funneling that generosity into the surrounding communities. Times are tough, but each year I’ve been continually awed by the number of employees who give what they can because they see the good that comes out of the campaign.”

Nearly 6,000 people across the University contributed to the \$1.5 million in donations—100 percent of which will be used on partnership programs in the neighborhoods around the University Park and Health Sciences campuses.

Now in its 18th year, the campaign offered online giving for the first time, which may have helped boost donations, according to Carolina Castillo, executive director of development for USC Civic Engagement.

“We realize that philanthropy is trending toward accessible giving platforms, so we figured an online, streamlined presence would encourage people to give more,” Castillo said. “Based on the results, we believe we succeeded.”

The GNC has raised more than \$13.5 million to support more than 450 partnerships between USC and the community that provide needed services, safer streets for children and improved college access for those in the neighborhoods surrounding the university’s campuses.

Symposium focuses on status of tobacco and war on cancer

On June 5, California voters will decide whether to pass Proposition 29, which would add \$1 to the cost of a pack of cigarettes. With that initiative as a backdrop, the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center is organizing a symposium to inform the USC community and the public about the status of tobacco legislation and the 40-year-long fight to find a cure for cancer.

“Tobacco, Proposition 29 and the War on Cancer” is scheduled from noon – 2:30 p.m., Wednesday, May 30, at Aresty Auditorium and Conference Center, lower ground level of the Harlyne J. Norris Cancer Research Tower at the Health Science campus. A box lunch will be served at 11:30 a.m.

The moderator is Stephen B. Gruber, director, USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center. Welcoming remarks will be made by Keck School of Medicine Dean Carmen A. Puliafito.

The symposium features expert presentations and panel discussions including:

- “Keeping California in the Fight Against Tobacco-related Cancer” by John Pierce, Walton Chair for Cancer Research and professor of family and preventive medicine, University of California San Diego.
- “Get ‘em Young and Train ‘em Right: Tobacco Industry Targeting of Teens,” by Robert Jackler, Sewall Professor and Chair, Department of Otolaryngology, Stanford University School of Medicine.
- A panel of cancer patients and survivors moderated by Uttam Sinha.

Advance registration is required. To register online: www.usc.edu/esvp (code: TCR). For information, call (323) 865-0801.

The Weekly NEWSMAKERS

U.S. News & World Report on May 14 ran an op-ed by **Ibrahim Busnaina**, a resident in psychiatry at the Keck School, on the need for medical students to study cultural diversity. He recommended that medical professionals prepare by identifying the languages spoken in the population they serve. “Familiarize yourself with language charts, which list languages that patients can point to in order to identify their native tongue, so that you can call in an interpreter,” Busnaina wrote.

A May 11 article by **Asian News International** featured research led by **Cheng-**

Ming Chuong, professor of pathology at the Keck School, that examines how hair and feathers are regenerated. Chuong and **Randall Widelitz, Ping Wu** and **Tingxin Jiang** of the Keck School reviewed dozens of papers on normal, noninjury-related regrowth as it occurs over a mammal or bird’s life. Further study could teach scientists how to regrow hair or skin after severe injuries leading to scar tissue, or even regenerating fingers or toes. A May 10 post on Science Blog also featured the paper.

A May 8 story on NPR Boston affiliate WBUR-FM

featured research by USC, RAND Corporation and Towers Watson on how high-deductible health plans can reduce health care costs. The study found that families in high-deductible plans were more mindful of their care, reporting fewer visits to their health care providers. “What we don’t yet know is whether the health care that was eliminated was unnecessary,” said study co-author **Neeraj Sood**, associate professor of clinical pharmacy and pharmaceutical economics & policy at the USC School of Pharmacy. A May 7 article in **National Journal** also quoted Sood about the research.

Calendar of Events

This Calendar of Events is also online at www.usc.edu/hscalendar for the Health Sciences campus community

Saturday, May 19

8 a.m. – 11 a.m. Department of Surgery Symposium. “Professionalism and Systems of Care: Challenges and Opportunities,” various speakers. NRT Aresty Auditorium. Info: (323) 442-2506

Monday, May 21

Noon. KSOM Research Seminar. “Neurovascular Origin of Neuronal Dysfunction in Alzheimer’s Disease,” Berislav Zlokovic, USC. NRT Aresty Auditorium. Info: (323) 442-0679

1 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.

ZNI Mini-Symposium. “Advancing Biomedical Technologies,” various speakers. ZNI 112. Info: (323) 442-2144

Tuesday, May 22

8 a.m. – 1:30 p.m. Cancer Center Grand Rounds. Annual USC Norris Cancer Center Poster Session for Postdoctoral Fellows and Graduate Students: “Searching for Creativity.” NRT LG 503/504 and Aresty Foyer. Info: (323) 442-7893

Friday, May 25

8:30 a.m. Pulmonary & Critical Care Research Seminar. “Molecular Mechanisms of Lung Destruction in Emphysema Pathogenesis,” Richard Barbers, USC. IRD 732-734. Info: (323) 226-7923

8:30 a.m. Surgical Grand Rounds. “Instrumental: A Tale of the Tools of Our Trade Told in Verse,” Jonathan Hiatt, UCLA. DOH 1st Floor Auditorium. Info: (323) 442-2506

Noon. Medicine Grand Rounds. “Mucor Mycosis,” Kenneth Lue, USC. IPT Conference Rm. B. Info: (323) 226-7556

Noon. Pharmacology and Pharmaceutical Sciences Distinguished Seminar Series. “Overcoming Critical Barriers Limiting the Efficacy of Drugs and Nanoparticles in Vivo,” Jan Schnitzer, PRISM. PSC 108. Info: (323) 442-2095

1 p.m. – 3:30 p.m. Partners in Discovery and Health Symposium. “Building an Institution-Wide Research Cohort with Integrated Health Records and

Biospecimens,” Thomas Insel, National Institute of Mental Health. NRT Aresty Auditorium. Info: (323) 442-3163

Wednesday, May 30

Noon – 2:30 p.m. Tobacco Symposium moderated by Stephen B. Gruber, director, USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center. “Tobacco, Proposition 29 and the War on Cancer,” Various speakers. NRT Aresty Auditorium. Info: (323) 442-2830

Thursday, May 31

Noon. Cardiology Grand Rounds. “Diabetes and Stable Ischemic Heart Disease,” Prakash Deedwania, UCSF. BCC 1st Floor Conference Room. Info: (323) 442-7419

Friday, June 1

11:45 a.m. SCEHS Center Seminar. “Measuring Solar Ultraviolet Exposures Over the Life Course,” Myles Cockburn, USC. SSB 116. Info: (323) 442-1096

Friday, June 8

8 a.m. – 5 p.m. Broad Stem Cell Symposium. “The Stem Cell Niche in Development and Regeneration,” various speakers. NRT Aresty Aud. Info: (323) 442-8080

Monday, June 11

Noon. KSOM Research Seminar. “The End of Illness,” David Agus, USC. NRT Aresty Auditorium. Info: (323) 442-0679

Friday, June 15

8:30 a.m. – 2 p.m. Southern California Alzheimer’s Disease Centers Research Symposium 2012. “Vascular Cognitive Impairment and Dementia,” various speakers. UPC: GER Auditorium. Info: (323) 930-6280

Monday, June 18

Noon. KSOM Research Seminar. “Linking RNA to Human Health,” John Rinn, Harvard. NRT Aresty Auditorium. Info: (323) 442-0679

Notice: Deadline for calendar submission is 4 p.m. Monday to be considered for that week’s issue—although three weeks’ advance notice of events is recommended. Please note that timely submission does not guarantee an item will be printed. Send calendar items to *The Weekly*, KAM 400 or fax to (323) 442-2832, or email to eblaauw@usc.edu. Entries must include day, date, time, title of talk, first and last name of speaker, affiliation of speaker, location and a phone number for information.



Valerie Zapanta

RAISING MONEY AND AWARENESS—USC Norris Cancer Hospital participated in the annual ELF Revlon Run Walk with 97 members on Team Norris (above), who raised almost \$2,000. USC Norris also hosted a booth at the event’s Health Expo. The booth attracted thousands of participants, who picked up copies of Norris publications, drawstring backpacks and sunscreens. Volunteer and team member Zoraida Maldonado, office supervisor, oncology services, said, “It was an excellent experience for both my daughter and me to volunteer at the Norris booth and be a part of Team Norris. We chose to walk in memory of our friend Fiona Field, former Norris genetic counselor, who recently passed away.”

Physician Assistant graduate focuses on putting patients first

By Matthew Kredell

As a child, Karissa Hodges liked to play doctor. But she didn’t use toys; she used real stethoscopes, blood-pressure pumps and other common medical instruments that she got from physicians and nurses at the USC Norris Cancer Hospital.

In the room next door, her mother was receiving radiation treatment for Hodgkin lymphoma. The experience could have been frightening and confusing, but staff members at USC Norris made Hodges feel like she and her mother were in safe hands.

Fast forward to today: Hodges is graduating with a master’s from the USC Primary Care Physician Assistant program at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. While childhood memories of accompanying her mother to the cancer hospital are, at times, hazy, she is certain the experience led to her becoming a medical professional.

“Now studying neurology and knowing how the brain works, I think you encode those things and really do process them when you are a kid,” Hodges said. “To me, the hospital wasn’t scary. It was this great place with these amazing people who took care of my mom. Everyone was so nice. It gets encoded in there that this is such a friendly profession.”

Every day for six weeks, as her mother underwent 45 minutes of radiation therapy, Hodges was left in the care of the cancer hospital staff. She even accompanied her mother on follow-up appointments.

Lenore Hodges fully recovered from Hodgkin lymphoma and a subsequent bout of breast cancer. And on her one-year anniversary in remission, the cancer hospital staff threw her a party. When the staffers

found out it also was Karissa’s birthday month, they turned the party into an impromptu birthday celebration.

“I definitely think that it helped shape my view later in life,” Hodges said. “I wanted to be there for someone like they were for me and my mom.”

Hodges also took away an appreciation for USC and made the Keck School her top choice for her master’s education. She especially liked the idea of the school’s three-year physician assistant program, seeing the extra year as a way to better prepare herself for the medical world. Rather than pursuing a career as a doctor, she chose to become a physician assistant because she wanted to have more of a personal life away from work and, more importantly, have more time to spend with patients.

“As a physician assistant, I can make a difference and

help to improve lives just as the medical team did for my mother,” Hodges said. “Physician assistants generally have more patient encounters and time with patients. I really like that aspect of getting to be with the patients more.”

At USC, Hodges served as a volunteer for the Keck Student Run Community Clinic and at health fairs to provide free screenings for residents in the neighborhood.

After completing her advanced rotation at the Fullerton Neurology and Headache Center, she decided that she wanted to go into pediatric neurology.

Following graduation, Hodges plans to take three weeks to study for the Physician Assistant National Certifying Exam. She hopes one day to land a job in Southern California doing for others what the cancer hospital did for her and her mother.



Karissa Hodges

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