

STUDENTS' TALENTS AND INTERESTS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Future Doctors, U n s c r i p t e d



In this issue of Buffalo Physician, we thought it would be fun to remind (and reassure) our readers that medical students at UB are individuals with myriad interests, talents and propensities that enrich their quest to become doctors and belie the notion of the “average medical student.”

To do this, we’ve profiled nine students (or groups of students) who have interesting stories to tell about their lives outside of medical school. The students we write about were nominated by their classmates. Many more nominations were made than we could possibly report on. Suffice it to say, UB medical students have a tremendous respect and appreciation for the intriguing mosaic of people with whom they study. We think you will too.

S.A. UNGER, EDITOR

Stories by **Judson Mead**

Emily Slotkin TWICE TRAINED

While attending the Eastman School of Music and the University of Rochester, where she earned degrees in music and English, Emily Slotkin thought about medicine, but there was no way she could fit pre-med courses into her schedule. It was only later, after she had graduated, that she decided she wanted to be a doctor, and so she headed back into the classroom to take the requisite courses she needed to apply to medical school.

Although her undergraduate education makes her a bona fide “nontraditional” medical student, it hardly makes her unique.

Instead, what sets Emily apart from her classmates—and probably almost every other medical student in the nation—is that she chose medicine over a career as a concert pianist.

Growing up in Monterey, California, Emily was a child prodigy who started playing at age three. Eventually she was studying with a teacher who lived an hour and a half away by car. She practiced three or four or five hours a day, every day, and traveled regularly to perform in competitions.

“It was my life,” says



Photos by KC Grant

Emily, who today is a second-year medical student at UB. “At the time it was really fun to be so good at something, to get all the accolades. Although, other than this, it felt like a normal life.”

With the distance afforded by time and a dramatic change in focus, Emily now says that things look different. “I didn’t know that other kids were able to pick and choose as much as they did,” she says.

When Emily was in her teens, her teacher encouraged her to enroll at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, considered one of the finest music conservatories in the world. Emily didn’t want to leave home before she finished high school, however, so she opted instead to wait and enroll at Eastman, where her teacher had trained.

Once in college, Emily’s life continued to be defined by “practice, practice, practice,” with the expectation being that one day she would get to Carnegie Hall.

But something happened that changed everything: Emily started to look out the practice room window.

“At some point I realized that maybe I didn’t want to practice six hours a day, seven days a week, and never take a vacation,” she recalls.

Testing the waters, Emily signed up for a second major in English. She flourished, graduating as the top English major at the University of Rochester.

She continued to loosen the reins on her musical ambitions, finally deciding to give up music as a career; although, along the way, she fell in love with and married a fellow musician.

“A lot of people were sad that I stopped playing,” she says. “Music is something that people who don’t play idealize—they say that if they could play well, they’d never stop. But when you do it as your job, it’s different.”

As Emily was letting go of music, she began to think about medicine, which isn’t a surprising career choice since both her parents, as well as a grandparent, are physicians.

“I’d always thought ‘no way!’” she says.

Her parents warned her that life in medicine is not easy, but that hasn’t deterred her. After all, life as a concert pianist is not all bows and acclaim.

“I’m still relieved that I don’t have to practice,” she says.

The piano, that is.

But pediatric oncology—now *that’s* an interest.

Mason Chang THE SPIRIT OF WONG FEI-HONG

“My sifu [instructor in Chinese kung fu] divides his curriculum into eight parts. I’m at part four or five now,” says third-year medical student Mason Chang. “My dream is to train with him for maybe the next five or ten years.”

Mason attended Cornell University and then Hahnemann Medical College, where he studied biochemistry. After graduation, he worked as a researcher for a pharmaceutical company and then enrolled at UB.

While at Cornell he was introduced to the discipline by a former student of the man who is now his sifu. Mason continued to practice the art and then got serious.

In 2004, he spent the entire summer training with his sifu. The training consisted of an hour-and-a-half of instruction a day with solitary practice before and after.

Mason is being initiated into the more advanced skills of a style of Shaolin kung fu called hong ga or hong kuen. The particular styles of this martial art have been so carefully preserved in their descent through generations of teachers and pupils that they can be traced back to their individual inventors.

“Any time you learn something new, you need hours and hours of practice before you begin to ‘know’ it,” he explains, adding that his work involves thousands of repetitions, then thousands more.

“I don’t know whether I could ever give it up,” he continues. “I’ve trained so much that even if I stop for a long time, it’s still there, I can still return to it. It’s part physically, part spiritually, fulfilling.”

The basis for all kung fu (and perhaps all martial arts) is a set of strengthening exercises introduced to monks of Shaolin Temple in China by the sixth century Indian monk Bodhidharma, whose teachings developed into Zen Buddhism. The fighting techniques that characterize the modern practice of Shaolin kung fu developed over the centuries.

Mason says he found his way to the discipline at Cornell under the spell of a Chinese movie about the

nineteenth-century folk hero Wong Fei-hong, martial artist and physician.

“There have been hundreds of movies about him because he’s idolized in the east the same way Robin Hood or Davy Crockett are



Photos by KC Grant



in the west,” he says.

Inspired, Mason sampled the martial arts—among them Thai kick boxing and Korean tae kwon do, and kung fu. “I think I decided to stick with hong kuen because it gives me a link to my Chinese roots,” he says.

Today, Mason passes on the tradition to neophytes at UB who take his weekly class through the Combined Martial Arts Club on the North Campus. “We share facilities and equipment,” he explains. “As a group, we work together to raise funds, practice and perform public demonstrations.”

To keep his skills sharp, he tries to train at least a few times a week, depending on his exam schedule. To do this, he needs gym space and a mirror; when he wants to do contact work, he needs another devotee. Some days he plans to train only for an hour, “but then I start training and get lost in the work until I have no idea how long I’ve been going,” he says.

As with any physical performance, it takes time and discipline. “Exams take priority, of course,” he notes.

David Brooks

VOTE-GETTER

If he can work out the details, third-year student David Brooks intends to earn MD, MBA and MPH degrees in 2008. In addition to medicine, business and public health, he has a strong interest in public service.

"I only do things when I think I can make a positive impact," he says in reference to a recent political adventure. "I chose medicine over business for that reason."

Prior to entering medical school, Brooks earned a bachelor of science degree in applied economics and business management, magna cum laude, at Cornell University. He also launched several successful business ventures.

At UB, he was approached by a member of Polity (the medical school's governing body), who suggested he consider running for the student representative's seat on the UB Council. The 10-member council serves as the

primary oversight and advisory board to the university and its president and senior officers.

David liked the idea and set his sights on winning the seat.

"I needed 350 petition signatures to get on the bal-

lot," he recalls. "I collected them from friends and by working the entrances to the Student Union and Alumni Arena with friends a few mornings. Getting the signatures was not a problem."

Getting elected was a challenge, however, because the electioneering had to be conducted by word of mouth. The student representative seat on the council is the only office at UB that represents the entire student body, and campaign rules are stringent: no party candidacies, no organizational endorsements and no mass e-mails by or for candidates.

"I wrote a platform, or rather a position, that stated I had the communication and business skills, the maturity, and the perseverance to be the most effective student

representative, and that I'd improve communications between students and administration and would work to improve library hours and North Campus parking," says David.

His medical school friends reached out to anyone they knew at UB and urged them to vote. The cumulative effect was a campaign of "friends motivating friends."

David is the first medical student ever elected to the council seat. He estimates that he spends between 15 and 20 hours a week on council business, meeting regularly with the vice presidents and attending campus events in order to stay in touch with the student body. He served on the presidential inaugural committee, and he was a member of the university's search committee for the vice president for health sciences.

"I get six hours of sleep," he says. "If I have two hours between meetings, I study."

"I'm happy," he adds. "When I can give back to the community, I do better in school."

And he does well for his constituents. The Health Sciences Library, thanks to his access to the levers of power, now has silent study areas and longer hours. North Campus parking? He's still working on that one.

In March 2005, after a scheduling check with his various deans, David reluctantly decided that it would not be feasible for him to run for a second term on the council. Next year he has clerkships; the year after that, the combined MBA/MPH. After that, who knows?

Matt Harris

THE FIX-IT GUY

It's a safe bet that naming gruff Paul Sr. of *American Chopper* as his favorite television character puts Matt Harris in rarified company among medical students. For the uninitiated, *American Chopper* is a highly specialized weekly reality television show for people who like engines and problem solving.

For Matt—a fourth-year student who took a year off



to complete an MBA—the fascination is with power boats, or, rather, one particular power boat.

After finishing business school and before he started his clinical rotations, Matt took the summer (and his life savings) to focus his energies on giving a derelict powerboat new life. In its prime, around the time Matt was

born, the boat could have been heard growling down Keuka Lake. It had belonged to his uncle, who died ten years ago, and in the intervening years had sat outside rotting, its Corvette engine rusted to pieces.

"I was interning at a Buffalo pharmaceutical company to finish my MBA requirements, and I had some flexibility in work hours," says Matt. "So I drove down the two-and-a-half hours to the family cottage on Keuka Lake every chance I got. I spent all the time I wasn't at work or on the road in the boathouse."

He talked to mechanics to discover what he needed to learn, and he searched the Internet to find books and information. "If it's written about in a book, I can do it," he explains. "It was just like taking a class."

After careful research, he bought the basic engine from a Boston company he read about on a website featuring off-shore powerboat racing. Local auto part and hardware stores were indispensable resources, and when he couldn't find what he needed on the shelf, he fabricated his own parts.

"I really began to understand how an engine works, why things are placed and shaped the way they are," he says.

As problems presented themselves, Matt practiced his differential diagnostic skills ("I couldn't get the engine to

turn over for five days after I'd finished it"), as well as emergency intervention skills ("The oil was draining out because the drain plug was the wrong size, so I reached around and under the engine to plug the leak with my finger, like plugging a ruptured aorta.")

By the end of the summer, the boat was rebuilt.

"This summer," says Matt, "it's going to take me water skiing from one end of Keuka Lake to the other."

After that, it is coming to Buffalo where it will be the envy of Lake Erie, he predicts.

"I grew up in a family of carpenters and tradesmen," says Matt. "I've always been confident I could do anything with my hands."

His next goal?

Why, a match in orthopaedic surgery, of course.

Marta Canfield

SWING AND SALSA

"Most of my friends are at least 10 years older than I am," says 25-year-old Marta Canfield, who is embarking on her fourth year of medical school at UB.

"The group of people I dance with travels to Rochester, Syracuse, Toronto and Akron for local events and as far away as the West Coast for national events. My core group of dance friends are Joe, Lori, Steve and Robin. I usually travel alone, but there can be as many as 10, 15 or 20 of us from the Buffalo area traveling to dance events."

Marta is a passionate and very good swing dancer with a background in ballroom and Latin dancing. Her forte is West Coast Swing. She may dance until 6 a.m. on her weekend travels and then spend the next day in a dance workshop. She competed on the West Coast Swing circuit last summer and did well. "It's a completely different reality—a lot of politics, a lot of drama, but also a lot of amazing and interesting people, and of course, an insane amount of dancing!" she says.

Over the summer, Marta also kept a firm footing in



Photo by Jenny Luk

Pictured, left to right, UB Council members Gerald Lippe, Edmond Gicewicz, MD '56, David Brooks, and Victor Rice



Photo by KC Grant

her medical studies by working with Richard Blondell, MD, at the UB Family Medicine Research Institute on a research project that looked at detoxification outcomes.

Marta started her dance career at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in Troy, New York, where she stepped out of a gymnastics background into inter-collegiate dancesport. The new sport took her to competitions throughout the Northeast and a dance week in England. She says there were weeks when she danced so much she could barely walk because her feet hurt so much.

When Marta learned West Coast Swing, she became part of a small, tight-knit community of dancers who are passionate about this form of swing dancing. Through this group, she met people from Buffalo who are now her close friends. When it was time to choose a medical school, she knew she'd be at home here.

During her first year at UB, Marta danced regularly

on the weekends at local dances.

At the start of her second year, she realized that she could serve two extracurricular interests at once by giving dance lessons on the medical school campus and using the money she raised to fund activities of the Women's Health Interest Group and the Integrative Medicine Club.

The lessons were a hit. She planned to teach West Coast Swing and Salsa, but the class wanted nothing but Salsa, so she went with the flow. She also ran a Salsa class at the beginning of the spring 2005 semester.

With fourth-year clinical commitments upon her, Marta knew that for the first time since she started, she'd have to put dancing aside—for the moment. So she gave herself something of a sendoff.

She'd attracted the attention of professionals on the dance circuit with her work last summer, and for spring break this year, she spent an all-dance week in Los Angeles, the world capital of West Coast Swing, working with the best. As a special surprise, Marta entered and won a competition while she was in California. She was also able to take a lesson from the top-ranked male dancer in West Coast Swing while she was there.

If all goes as planned, she will return.

For the next year, however, her dance friends will have to curtail their demands on her time.

"Sometimes I have to ask them, 'Are you forgetting that I'm in medical school?'"

Mohammed Faraz Khan

CALL ME ALADDIN

"I first visited the U.S. in 1991," says second-year medical student Mohammed Faraz Khan. "Upon arriving, we went straight to Disney World, and I thought, 'This is America—Mickey and Minnie.' This was my perception of the U.S."

Faraz was born in Hyderabad, India, and spent

his childhood in Saudi Arabia. In 1997 his family moved to upstate New York, where Faraz attended the University of Rochester.

During spring break of his senior year—and after he had been accepted to medical school—Faraz decided to make a sentimental journey back to Disney World before embarking on "the never-ending story of study, study,

study." While in Florida, he discovered that Disney holds auditions around the country for summer workers to depict its famous lineup of characters. He tried out for several roles—at UB's Center for the Arts, as fate would have it—and he was a hit.

The next summer Faraz saw the world of his childhood fantasy either from inside the thick fur coat of Tigger, or elegantly attired as nimble Aladdin, the two roles for which he was cast.

Faraz is a near-perfect Aladdin: tall, slim, handsome, graceful. The only way he fell short of the Disney ideal is an almost-imperceptible accent—indeed one that the un-Disneyed might expect to hear from an English-speaking Aladdin. For this reason Faraz worked more often as a non-speaking "parade Aladdin," riding in state with Princess Jasmine. Sometimes he danced as a "fur character" in the daily parades.

Disney sells illusion and they give good value; however, the summertime heat in Orlando takes its toll on anyone wearing a fur coat.

"In parades, we had to dance a fifth of a mile past the audience just in case anyone might see us stop our routines," says Faraz. "When we finally reached the end of the parade route, there were cots for characters to collapse on. Along the parade route, there were handlers ready to step out and carry off any character who went down.

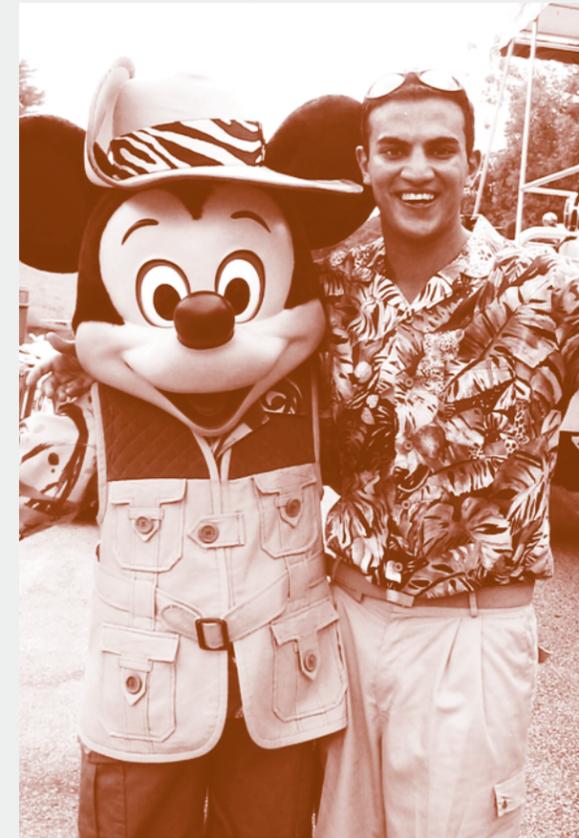
"Fur characters can only survive on the set for about 25 minutes," Faraz adds.

As a result, after Tigger had signed autographs and posed for pictures for this set amount of time, an official escort, who always stayed at his side to protect him from over-adoring children, would announce that Tigger needed a drink of water and lead the wilting Faraz through a stage door where he'd tag an identical Tigger on the back and send him out.

Backstage he'd peel off his costume, completely change his soaking wet underclothes, gear back up and await his tag to go back out.

Sustained by "unlimited PowerAde," he did this eight times a day.

During his summer-long stint, Faraz was something of an oddity because most of his character colleagues were aspiring actors and dancers.



Yet he came away impressed with the relentlessness of the Disney magic. "It's hard to see how people can say, 'Please have a magical day,' all day long and keep up the enthusiasm."

But some of it stuck. "When I started medical school," he recalls, "someone pointed a camera at me, and my arms shot out in an animated pose."

Lesley Loss and Josh Weitz

UNDERWATER DREAMERS

If your youthful ambition to be a marine biologist began to fade in your first year of college, you could do much worse than meet a fellow freshman in chemistry lab whose ambition to be a marine biologist is also slipping away and then go scuba diving together. And then go again, and again.



So it happened that Lesley Loss and Josh Weitz found each other as scuba partners at Colby College in Waterville, Maine.

Josh, a second-year medical student, grew up in Traverse City, Michigan (on Lake Michigan), and earned certification as a diver at age 11. He loves the difference between above and below the surface. "Diving throws you into an alien world," he says. "It's a peaceful environment. You are very much aware of yourself; there's no noise other than waves, your air bubbles, maybe a fish gnawing on coral. The colors are vivid."

Lesley, a third-year medical student, grew up in Rochester, New York. At 15, she learned how to dive at a marine biology camp in Florida.

"At first I just liked the thrill of being underwater. Then I started to pay attention to what I was learning about in camp—the animal behavior, the coral," she says. "Your visual senses are enhanced by the deprivation of your other senses."

Lesley and Josh have dived together in Florida, the Caribbean and Hawaii, to name a few spots. Their current "dream destinations" are in the South Pacific and include Palau (which bills itself as "the last word in underwater wonderlands") and Yap ("the world's foremost destination for seeing manta rays").

Diving together, they have learned that there are different things to see on different seafloors. (They report that while their dives in the Great Lakes haven't revealed much notable aquatic life, the shipwrecks are interesting.)

On a cold Buffalo day when the closest they can get to a warm ocean is to immerse themselves in diving magazines and plan their next trip, they recall some of their favorite underwater scenes. For Lesley, it's looking into a small crevice and seeing a fire clam with its bright orange mouth agape and fiery red tentacles waving gently. For Josh, it's the large sharks, powerful and sleek.

One says while the other nods: "It's a hobby. But it's an important part of both our lives."

Shweta Patel

THE WHOLE POINT

“When I was little, I loved to dance,” says third-year student Shweta Patel. “I loved to mimic the dances I saw on TV. I loved the extravagance of the dances in *Bollywood movies. When I was eight, I went to India with my parents for the summer and my mother enrolled me in a Kathaka school, where I tried to learn an entire year’s curriculum in three months.”

Today Shweta must balance her love of traditional Indian dance with other pressing commitments, such as medical school, naval-officer training and fulfilling her duties as (past) president of Polity, the student governing body. And she did manage to find time last year to compete in the Miss India USA pageant, where she was named Miss Congeniality.

Shweta, who hopes to be a surgeon, is particularly interested in one of the two main traditional Indian dance forms, called Kathaka.

**India’s film and music industry*

The Kathaka tradition allows creativity in movement and expression while maintaining tradition in costume and the music of tabla, sitar and ghongroo—huge, jingling ankle bracelets with as many as 50 bells apiece. Of ancient origin, it can be the subject of scholarly disquisition as in “Dr. Ranjana Srivastava explores the roots of Kathaka dance form to reveal its sublime, philosophic, esoteric and divine dimensions.” And it can be the delight of a girl growing up in Queens, New York.

“As a child, I just loved to perform,” says Shweta. “I loved the attention, the intricate costumes, the makeup, the stage, the intricacy of the dance itself.”

Although her parents treated her to a Kathaka camp one summer, Shweta was on her own after that because the nearest school for the dance, on Long Island, was too far away. Not one to be deterred, she made up her own dances and performed whenever she could in ready-made costumes. As she grew older, she became more ambitious and needed her own designs, which had to be hand sewn.

When she was a teenager, Shweta’s family moved to Houston. “By that time I’d created my own dance persona that was a combination of my training, my mimicking what I saw in the movies and my own modifications, which I would call choreography,” she explains.

Once in college, Shweta transferred to UB to try for an early-assurance slot at the medical school while she studied jazz dancing and ballet to polish her Kathaka performance.

“Those disciplines, I think, brought me to the climax of my dance training,” she says. “I also added dramatic facial expressions and expressive acting to my performance, and I began dancing to the song ‘Breathless,’ which is a classic Indian song with a touch of jazz in it, and the perfect embodiment of my dance.”

When Shweta entered medical school, she put away her costume and turned her attention to her new commitments, such as serving as president of Polity her second year. The summer after her first year, she completed her naval-officer training in Newport, Rhode Island. When she returned to Buffalo in the fall, she received a call from the

Shweta Patel, left, with friend at a recent dance competition.



Miss India USA pageant, inviting her to enter.

Recalling how she made the difficult decision to compete, she says: “I knew that if I were to do it, I’d have to work out to get into ideal shape, I’d have to practice, I’d have to choreograph, I’d have to put my costume and everything else in order. I’d have to make room in my exam schedule. I’d have to arrange things with my Clinical Practice of Medicine preceptor.”

She did it, and she was chosen as one of the 10 finalists. This meant she could perform her dance in the talent round. “Which was the whole point,” she notes with great satisfaction.

Bob Bucelli, Colin Dauria, Jessica Karl, Emily McCourt, Melissa Schafer Owczarzak, Ashley Stewart, Tom Trimarco

MUDDY CALVES

What do you need to run a 200-mile relay through the White Mountains of New Hampshire?

If you’re a second-year medical student at UB, you need permission from your cardiology instructor to miss a lecture. “He said it would be good for our hearts,” remembers Emily McCourt.

Emily is one of the Muddy Calves, a predominately UB medical school team of twelve runners that has

competed for the past two years in the Reach the Beach Relay. She joined the team in response to a general call by e-mail from Colin Dauria, captain of the 2003 team, to any UB medical student interested in a 200-mile relay.

"I jumped at it," she says.

In 2004, the Muddy Calves finished 64th overall, 23rd out of 109 teams in their category (mixed-open), in 28:19:56, or 8:07 per mile over the 208-mile course.

The team for the 2003 relay was created by Colin Dauria, then a first-year student, and his Ultimate-Frisbee partner Bob Bucelli, a student in the Medical Science Training Program, then in his second year of medical school. They recruited runners where they could

find them, but they hoped to make it a school tradition. Dauria, a former cross-country runner, came up with the name. "Cross-country races tend to get a little dirty," he notes.

"It works out well. We decorate the cars and tee-shirts with cow imprints, we moo and bang on a cowbell to cheer each other on, and we get to wear a cow costume while we're running."

Dauria, McCourt, Bucelli and most of their teammates are serious runners, but they are all emphatic about why the team participates. "This race isn't about winning," says Dauria, "it's about bonding with teammates and fellow runners."

The relay baton is a slap bracelet. The transition areas between stages are supported by sponsors like the Girl Scouts, who serve drinks and provide facilities. Two team vans leapfrog along the course, keeping the Muddy Calves supplied with fluids as they run.

"Bob plans out the leg assignments with a medical student's truly obsessive care for detail," Emily says.

There are 36 legs in all. For the 2004 race, Emily ran two night legs along pitch-dark country roads. In addition to her cow costume, she wore a reflecting vest and lights fore and aft. On her first leg, at 9 p.m., she never saw another runner; on her second leg, at 4 a.m., she passed a few, and a few passed her. "Runners will run with each other for a little way and chat before moving on," she says.

The course winds through spectacular mountain scenery and picturesque white clapboard New England villages toward Hampton Beach on New Hampshire's short seacoast.

"We don't put pressure on each other,"

Emily says. "Ashley Stewart broke her foot and had to hobble, but that was okay—with us, that is."

In 2004, Emily drew the penultimate leg that takes runners up a hill that from the top finally reveals the coast spread out below. "Hurricane Ivan was just off shore, the sky was black, there were sheets of rain

scudding over the ocean," she recalls.

"By the end of the race, you are limping horribly and you question whether you'll ever run again," says Dauria, who plans to run the Chicago marathon this fall. "But when you cross that finish line, it's a feeling of accomplishment that you will never forget."

After their 2003 race, the Muddy Calves drove straight home. After their 2004 run, they spent the night in Hampton Beach, stayed off their feet, warmed up, and then drove home.

Planning for the 2005 race is well under way. Those

who will be third-years are checking their clerkship lottery draws against the race date. Someone in the group will be looking for a new cow costume: the first went straight off a body and into a bag until a year later when it was discovered to be unsalvageable; the second was cut down for a victory swim.

Bob Bucelli says the relay is a nice example of balance in life: "No one puts running ahead of family or school, but for one weekend we can go out with 250 other teams, forget about everything and just run." **BP**



Back row, second from the left, third-year student Melissa Schafer Owczarzak; third from the left, third-year student Thomas Trimarco; and far right, second-year student Ashley Stewart. Front row, far left, fourth-year student Jessica Karl; third from the left, Peter Fanti, MD '05, the team's driver; fifth from the left, third-year student Emily McCourt and sixth from the left, fourth-year student Colin Dauria. Inset, below, Robert Bucelli, MD '05.



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