

STORIES OF TRIUMPH & SUCCESS

by Vicky Cerino & Jo Giles

One found his passion after a near-fatal car wreck. Another left a refugee camp in war-torn Sudan. Hawaiian sisters carry on a family legacy in dentistry. In all, 647 UNMC students received diplomas in Kearney, Lincoln, Omaha and Scottsbluff during spring commencement ceremonies. Here are a few of their stories:



PASSION FOR NURSING GROWS AFTER NEAR-FATAL ACCIDENT

Despite a near-fatal car wreck that left him disabled, 38-year-old Gale Hood has found his calling in nursing.

In 1998, Hood was driving to work when he fell asleep at the wheel and hit another car head-on.

The impact critically injured Hood and a girl in the other car. Both were in comas for a time.

"For a while, it was touch and go. There was a question whether either one of us would survive," said Hood, who at the time worked for the railroad in Wyoming.

The accident meant several surgeries and a long rehabilitation. He lost much of the use of his right hip. Now, the range of motion in his leg is limited and he limps.

Part of the rehabilitation was dealing with the guilt of causing others pain, although, he said, the young woman who was injured in the wreck held no grudge against him.

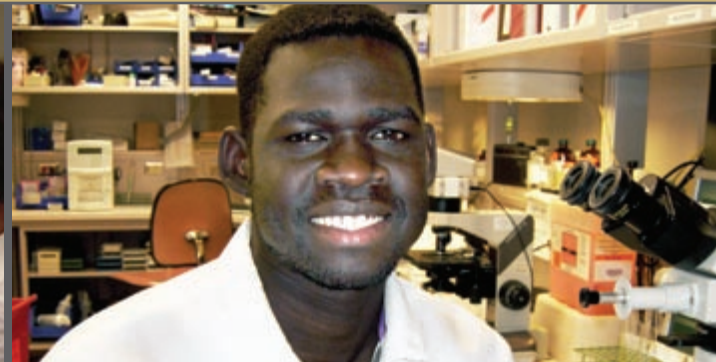
As he recovered, Hood felt an interest in nursing – present before the accident – begin to grow. He decided to pursue nursing while in vocational rehabilitation, but his counselor, worried that Hood's disability would prevent him from being a nurse, discouraged him.

Hood didn't listen and became one of the 2008 graduates from the UNMC College of Nursing's West Nebraska division in Scottsbluff. He now works in the Western Nebraska Veterans Home in Scottsbluff.

"You learn how to compensate for any disabilities you have if you look for what you can do and find ways around obstacles," he said.

Hood knew he was in the right career when he began to work in such nursing specialties as intensive care, pediatrics and emergency while in school.

"It fits my personality. I loved making a difference."



SUDANESE-AMERICAN FINDS SUCCESS AFTER REFUGEE CAMP

Growing up was hard for Yohanes Tot, a refugee from war-torn Sudan who lived in an Ethiopian camp for 16 years.

"It's very bad. You go to school, come home and that's it," Tot said. "Living in a refugee camp is living in a compound. It's hard, but one way to get through it is by imagining things."

Tot imagined a better life and upon his arrival in Omaha eight years ago, he worked to make his dream come true.

While attending Benson High School, he worked about 30 hours a week. He went on to earn a bachelor's degree in biotechnology from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, while working a full-time job.

He earned another degree this year, a bachelor's degree in clinical laboratory science from the UNMC School of Allied Health Professions, all the while working 25 hours a week.

"Sometimes I wouldn't see my apartment for 25 hours," Tot said.

And if he wasn't busy enough, he completed requirements to become a United States citizen in 2005. He also volunteers with the Red Cross, UNMC's student-run SHARING Clinic and serves as a translator for Alegent Health.

Tot, who now works in the Omaha Division of the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System, spoke highly of faculty, fellow students and co-workers in the lab at UNMC.

"The people are really nice. They opened their hearts to a new culture and took time to learn," he said. "You might be surprised to learn new things if you get to know someone's culture."



AMERICAN INDIAN MOTHER OF 6 DEDICATED TO RURAL HEALTH CARE

Driving a tractor with her sister and working the beet, bean and potato fields in the summer are some of the earliest childhood memories for Anpo Wichapi Charging Thunder, M.D.

She grew up in Minatare, Neb., a small town of about 700 people. Like many small towns, it had just the basics ... a library, post office, laundromat and bar. No hospital or clinic for residents to receive medical care.

It wasn't any better on the nearby American Indian reservation.

Dr. Charging Thunder said she observed disparities in the health care of rural citizens and members of American Indian tribes.

"I became determined to fulfill my dream of becoming a physician to improve health care and narrow the gap between such disparities."

Now, the College of Medicine graduate is in the first of a three-year residency in family medicine at UNMC. She is the mother of six children – five of whom she had before she entered medical school.

She also sees patients at One World Community Health Center, which offers care to Omaha's underserved populations. Upon completion of her residency, she plans to return to rural western Nebraska to practice family medicine.

A member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, Dr. Charging Thunder heard about the Rural Health Opportunities Program (RHOP) when she was a senior in high school. She did not enroll at Chadron State College (CSC), however, until the fall of 2000, eight years after she dropped out of high school.

To get to CSC, she drove 100 miles to and from school Monday through Friday. She also worked two to three evenings a week as a nurse's aid at Gordon Memorial Hospital, where she studied when work was slow.

"Had it not been for RHOP and the minority scholarships I received while at UNMC, I may not have made it this far," she said.



THIRD GENERATION DENTISTS FOLLOW IN FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS

They've been together since birth. Well, actually, a little before that even.

They spent high school together, their undergraduate college years and even their dental school years at UNMC.

For the next two years, twins Renee and Cherie Uchida will remain together as they perfect their dental skills in the UNMC College of Dentistry pediatric residency program in Omaha.

The twins, who are from the Hawaiian island of Oahu, are carrying on a family legacy. Their grandfather, father and uncle are dentists.

Their father, Clyde, a 1971 graduate of the UNMC College of Dentistry, practices pediatric dentistry in Honolulu where Renee and Cherie hope to return.

"We're fortunate to get into the program," Cherie said. "UNMC was our first choice. We wanted to follow in our father's footsteps."

The twins knew from a young age they wanted to be dentists.

"We've been exposed to dentistry since we were young," Cherie said. "We've been blessed to have those connections. We like dentistry because we like working with people, helping others and working with our hands."

They also have made history as the first twins entering the college's residency program in its nearly 60-year history.

The twins chose pediatric dentistry because of the potential impact on children's lives, as well as the enjoyment of working with children.

"There are funny comments you get from working with children," Renee said. "It's priceless. It makes every day different"