



Meet students in WMU medical school's inaugural class as school prepares for grand opening today

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KALAMAZOO, MI — The Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine will hold a grand opening ceremony this afternoon for about 1,500 guests.

To watch a live stream of the grand opening, beginning at 4:15 p.m., visit the **medical school website**. Although the grand opening is a closed affair, the public is welcome to participate in a **community open house** from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 20 at the school, 300 Portage St. The event is free and open to the public.

The celebration is, however, just another day for the 54 first year medical students who already have been hard at work at their studies since August. The 54 are the survivors from the enrollment process, in which the school received 3,751 applications, conducted 656 telephone interviews and actually conducted on-site interviews with 333 candidates.

The inaugural class represents 14 states, although 23 percent of the students are from Michigan. Their most common undergraduate degrees are in biology and chemistry — although other majors among the students include economics, English, women's studies, psychology and theater.

Below, meet some of the students in the WMed class of 2018:

Kevin Cates, 29, Chicago

He has a bachelor's degree in biological anthropology from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and a master's degree in public health from the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Cates is the recipient of a National Health Services Corps scholarship. The four-year award will cover his medical school costs and provide a living stipend. In return, Cates will commit to serve as a primary care provider in an underserved community, which could be an inner city setting or a rural area.

"Before coming to medical school, I worked in a federally qualified health center that served low-income folks for the past six years," Cates said. "It was the most fulfilling work and the most difficult work. It's something I want to keep doing."

"I feel like if you're going into medicine to get the biggest salary, on one hand, good for you, on the other hand, that's not where I'm going. I want to do something that does the most good. Being a primary care physician will impact so many lives. If you can impact patients, then you can impact their children. You can help set healthy ways of living that will affect generations."

Nicole Baker, 22, Greenville

Baker earned her bachelor's degrees in biomedical sciences and French at Western Michigan University. She hopes to combine her medical degree with her degree in French to do nonprofit work in other countries.

"I've always known I've wanted to be a doctor. I don't remember sitting down and thinking about it. I love the opportunity to always be learning. It's work that matters and work that makes a difference."

While she initially thought she might go into neurology or psychology, Baker says she's keeping an open mind about possible areas of specialty. She transferred to Western after one year at the University of Michigan and that same year Western announced it was opening a medical school.

"I felt like it was made for me. I applied to other medical schools in the state like Michigan and Michigan State, but I've been considering Western every since they announced it. The school is amazing."

John Livingston, 21, San Jose, California

Livingston learned about the WMU medical school from an advertisement. It was the only brand new school he saw, and "after I interviewed here, I was hooked. Everything about the school — minus the temperature — was a huge plus for me."

He was particularly impressed by the school's emphasis on doctor-patient interactions.

"There is more patient exposure than I've seen anywhere before," Livingston said. "We already completed our medical first responder training. We started our patient experience the first month — most schools wait until the third year. They're definitely on the cutting edge of everything as far as medical education is concerned."

He said he's always wanted to be a doctor – inspired by his mother, who is a nurse, and his father who is in the Coast Guard and in the business of saving lives in another way.

"Plus, I had juvenile arthritis and had a lot of exposure to doctors when I was younger. Really good doctors were a really good motivational factor, and bad doctors, I hated and wanted to do better than they did."

He earned his bachelor's degree in molecular cell biology. He describes himself as action-oriented and an inventor who likes to work with his hands, so he can see himself pursuing emergency medicine or trauma surgery.

Lance von Bracht, 26, Utah

The new WMU medical school has a great campus, but that's not what drew von Bracht to Kalamazoo. "It was the student-centered curriculum. This is a pioneering school. Basically, their emphasis is on what the students actually need rather than a following a system that has been done for years. The simulations, the patient interaction early on, and team-based learning. This isn't just being lectured to. There is real opportunity to apply what you learn to new areas."

In addition, he said he's found the medical school staff incredibly supportive. "I'm very impressed by the dedicated state. They communicate with us and adapt to what we need. They work hard to do that."

He thinks he'd like to go into pediatrics, because he's always connected with children. One of his challenges in medical school involves a very specific child, his 5-month-old daughter Liesel. As a new dad, he seeks balance between his studies and his home life, which he says wife Marianne does a wonderful job keeping in order.

Alan Hifko, 28, Clinton Township

While some students profess that they always dreamed of being a doctor, not so for Hifko. After high school he spent a year in community college, enlisted in the U.S. Air Force where he worked in nuclear debris collection and analysis, then he enrolled at Western Michigan University where he earned a bachelor's degree in biochemistry and a master's degree in biomedical sciences at George Mason University.

"I'm not sure when I decided to do this. At WMU, I intended to become a physics major but I switched to chemistry. I realized I really liked the science of chemistry and biology and the applications to the human body. I'd like a job that is hands-on and very personal."

He remembers hearing that Western was opening a medical school, but thinking it wouldn't be open in time for his needs. He was thrilled when the timelines meshed.

"I like the team-based learning. Every week you're with a different group, getting to learn from different people. That prepares you to work with teams of varied health care professionals. And, it's definitely a more hands on approach. I think more hands-on experience early on makes you better equipped as a doctor to deal with patients."

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