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## Curing the Community as a Whole

A Mercer program teaches medical students to take a holistic approach to healing all that ails a community.

By [Michael Stone](#) | [Email the author](#) | March 8, 2012

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Josh Myers, a first-year medical student in [Mercer's community medicine program](#), has studied Powder Springs the past two weeks: the economy, the schools, the primary health concerns and more.

He also has talked with major stakeholders, including Mayor Pat Vaughn and [Hillgrove](#) Principal Robert Shaw, while shadowing Dr. Chris Wizner, who in addition to practicing at [Powder Springs Medical Center](#) is a [City Council](#) member and an active parent at Hillgrove.

"This has definitely opened my eyes," said Myers, 24, a [Harrison High](#) graduate. "Being a doctor's not just seeing your patient. It's a community thing, and to be involved in the community, I think, is one of the great privileges that can come from being a physician."

Myers is one of about 100 first-year Mercer students shadowing doctors across Georgia for two weeks to get a holistic feel for their communities so they can identify what drives certain illnesses.

The federal Health Resources and Services Administration tracks the growing number of American communities designated as [health professional shortage areas](#) (HPSAs). As of Feb. 29, 5,816 communities with a total of 59.3 million residents carried the HPSA designation, and an additional 16,003 doctors were necessary to meet their primary care needs.

Mercer's community medicine program was founded in the hope that its graduates would stay in Georgia and help rural and underserved communities.

"If you have a physician who's working in Powder Springs and he or she has a patient who's addicted to a drug, there's a reason that person's addicted to that drug," said Dr. McKinley Thomas, the director of Mercer's community medicine program. "It has to do with the economy. It has to do with education. It's all related."

Within his director role, Thomas also coordinates the school's Community Preceptor Network, the 280 Georgia physicians—many of them Mercer grads themselves—in 109 counties who take on the students.

Like Wizner, a family doctor, they are all primary care physicians: family medicine, internal medicine, OB/GYN, pediatrics or general surgery.

The network's focus is twofold: to give student's real-world experience starting in their first year, and to teach holistic methods of community medicine.

"We try to take a holistic approach to this, and one thing our students probably get sick of hearing us say is they need to learn how to be community-responsive, to be representatives of their community," Thomas said.

Mercer's mission is to target communities that are rural and underserved, though those are becoming more scarce as populations grow.

So exceptions like Powder Springs, which has several medical facilities nearby, are allowed. That helps ensure students like Myers, whose parents live in Kennesaw, have housing.

He and his classmates will wrap up their two weeks Friday.

"This overall process is making me realize the possibilities of influence a physician has on a community," he said.

## Returning to Powder Springs

The students assess the community and its needs and problems so they can complete a paper afterward. They also pick up some tools of the trade in the doctor's office.

"The first year's pretty much walking around with the doctor, watching, because honestly you don't know a lot during your first year," said Wizner, who graduated from Mercer in 1988 and shadowed a doctor in Taylorsville.

"It's little things you pick up that you build what you like out of it," he said. "There are things that I learned from that doctor that I probably still do today."

In their second year, the students will return to the same doctors for four weeks, isolate a specific instance of a challenge facing the community and work toward a solution.

High blood pressure, for example, could be widespread in one community, Thomas said, but a doctor "can't just look at their blood pressure."

The economy, crime, education, obesity and other factors need to be examined, he said. "All that ties in together in identifying what the problems are with this individual."

The students don't return their third year, but in their fourth, they come back for four more weeks to take the isolated problem and try to broaden the solution to the whole community.

"Communities get sick, and doctors are going to need to address the needs of the community, as well as addressing the needs of the patient," Thomas said.

## Graduation and Beyond

Thomas said about 65 percent of the Mercer program's graduates end up practicing in Georgia, and a "good chunk" work in smaller communities.

Wizner, who grew up in the area, is part of that 65 percent. Even while shadowing in Taylorsville, he knew he wanted to return to Powder Springs and serve his home community.

"If I was going into practice here, what would I need to look for?" he would ask as he studied Powder Springs.

Wizner started practicing in the Town Square in 1995, moved to the new building in 1997, and has built a hefty patient base using aspects of the holistic community approach he developed through Mercer.

He cycles in three Mercer students a year: one in the first year, one in the second and one in the fourth.

Myers said he doesn't know as a first-year medical student where he'll end up or what exactly he'll practice. The two-week program, though, is a "great experience" because it gets students into the field and frees them from being "bogged down with all the science."

Regardless of what he does later in his career, Myers said he'll never forget the approach and benefits of holistic community medicine. "It's the idea of being able to assess the community and come up with realistic ways that you can use your expertise and your influence."

*This article is part of "[Dispatches: The Changing American Dream](#)," our ongoing series about how people in West Cobb are adapting to the challenges of life in the 21st century. You can find more Dispatches from across the country on [The Huffington Post](#).*

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