

Volunteerism Spotlight - Leah Topper

Making A Difference Can Begin with a Game of Chess

Georgia ACP recently spoke with Leah Topper, a third-year medical student at the Augusta University/University of Georgia Medical Partnership, who coordinates the school's senior visiting volunteer program.

How did you get involved with the senior visiting program?

This particular project grew out of a research project by some students that were ahead of me.

The project looked at levels of isolation in elderly people in Athens and whether a regular visit from a medical student helped to alleviate some of those feelings of isolation. This project became a continuation of that survey and its findings.

When I started as a first year, a second-year student and myself alternated weeks visiting a senior identified by the Athens Community Council on Aging's Meals on Wheels program. I visited the gentleman I was assigned to every other week for two years.

There wasn't much from a medical perspective that we could do as medical students— just take his blood pressure and ask about recent doctors' visits— so the visits were mostly about talking and getting to know him. The gentleman that I visited had had a few severe strokes, and he couldn't walk independently or easily. Over the course of our weeks together, I learned about his life and learned that he liked to play chess. The second year and I found a chess set for him and began to play regularly during our visits; he beat me every time!



What drew you to this program?

I've always enjoyed conversations with my grandparents and finding out about their life and their life experiences. And, in this case, the program involved seniors who might not necessarily have had engagement or social interactions with other people very frequently. I realized this was an unmet need that it was very easy to fulfill - not necessarily because I was a medical student, but as a fellow, interested human being.

How does volunteering complement your medical education?

Volunteering throughout medicine school has helped add more nuance to what we learn about and keep things in perspective for me. Another important part of volunteering, especially during medical school, is how it connects me with the community that I live in and connects me to people I might not interact with otherwise.

Medical school can be a busy time and practicing medicine may not leave a lot of free-time. What can you say to inspire others to become involved in a project in their community?

Volunteering is more than just another commitment or a resume-booster. Spending just a few hours volunteering per month can give you more meaning and fullness in your own life and simultaneously help improve the community around you.