

My Journey to Graduate School

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I fell in love with science when I was in sixth grade. I had always enjoyed science up to that point, but when we started learning about bacteria and the diseases they caused, I was hooked. In 7th grade I wrote up a proposal, complete with a hypothesis that AIDS and smallpox were related. I showed it to my 7th grade science teacher, Ms. Hager, and asked how I could go about proving my hypothesis. Of course, she knew that I was in way over my head, but she continued to provide me with extra science material to keep me busy and encouraged my interest. At the same time, my mother, an oncology nurse, was working with a physician named Dr.

Rodrigues. Although an oncologist, he also had an interest in infectious disease and provided me with learning material. It was at that point that I decided I wanted to become a physician.

I sailed through high school, taking all the AP science classes my school had to offer and excelled in them. I found out in the fall of 2007 that I had been accepted to the University of Wisconsin for undergrad – my top choice school. I couldn't wait to finish my senior year and move on to undergrad in the fall. I was thrown a curve ball in May of 2008 with less than a month left in my senior year of high school. My mom, an oncology nurse and my very best friend, was diagnosed with an advanced form of an uncommon cancer. Suddenly, overnight, my world was turned upside down.

In light of my mom's cancer diagnosis, I wanted to defer matriculation to UW, however my parents insisted that I head off to school in the fall of 2008, despite my mom's disease. Despite a very successful first semester of undergrad, as my mom grew sicker and sicker, school got more and more difficult for me. It was hard to focus on classes while wondering how my mom's chemo was going, if the terrible side effects that she had from her treatment were causing her pain, wishing I could spend time with her, fretting over how my little sister was handling everything, feeling bad that I wasn't home to help my dad take care of my mom, etc. Fall of my senior year of undergrad, on September 27, 2012, my mom lost her battle with cancer, and passed the torch onto my sister and me to keep her fight and memory alive. Less than a week later, I was back at school, expected to finish up my senior year just like any other student.

As graduation approached, I decided to put off applying to medical school and started applying for jobs. Although my undergrad degree was in biology and microbiology, I really wanted to study human biology – specifically cancer genetics. Despite this not being my field of study, Dr. Liang Wang at the Medical College of Wisconsin decided to take a chance and hire me as a research technologist. I had planned to work for him for a year before applying for medical school, but once I started, I fell in love with cancer genetics research and stayed in his lab for three years. During my third year, with Dr. Wang's encouragement, I applied for Ph.D. programs all over the country. I ultimately decided to attend graduate school here, at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and joined the Genetics and Epigenetics Program. Where better to study cancer than the #1 cancer center in the USA?!

I am currently working in Dr. Subrata Sen's lab on ways to detect pancreatic cancer early by studying biomolecules in the body fluids of people at risk for this terrible disease. Unfortunately, only 9% of pancreatic cancer patients survive five or more years. The earlier this disease is detected, the better the outcomes are for patients. By making discoveries in the lab, I hope to translate these findings to the clinic. I am hoping to graduate soon. Then I will pursue a post-doctoral fellowship, hopefully followed by finding a faculty position and starting a lab of my own.