Across Vermont, Freeman Medical Scholars are returning to provide the Green Mountain State with the physicians it needs.

by Edward Neuert
It began to rain in the early evening of July 13, 2008, and the crowd of hundreds of people who’d been gathering on the green at Bandstand Park in Lyndonville, Vt., moved to a local school auditorium instead. They’d come from throughout the Northeast Kingdom town of about 1,200 inhabitants, from the surrounding towns of rural Caledonia County, and from points across the map of Vermont and New Hampshire, to gather for a service to honor the memory of a man whose loss had touched everyone in the community. Less than a week before, John Elliott, M.D.’72, had died in an accident. For more than 30 years Elliott had provided the full range of family medicine needs from a practice he and Tim Thompson, M.D., had started together, a practice that for most of those years had been known as Corner Medical — named for its original corner location in a renovated 19th Century Lyndonville school. “It was really more like a professional marriage,” says Thompson. “We worked together constantly, day in, day out, and we taught each other a lot over the years. His loss was just huge.”

Losing a doctor suddenly creates an obvious immediate need for a small community. But all across Vermont, shortages of primary care and other specialties are endemic. This pressing need was the driving force behind the Freeman Foundation’s establishment in 2000 of the Freeman Medical Scholars program at the College of Medicine. The Stowe and New York-based foundation, with the involvement of Doreen and Houghton “Buck” Freeman and their son, Graeme, has gifted the College approximately $2 million a year since 2000 to provide substantial scholarship aid to UVM medical students committed to practicing in Vermont. The program also supports student projects in community health improvement throughout the state, and has provided educational loan repayment awards for physicians of all specialties in Vermont. By cutting students’ post-medical school debt by as much as $40,000 each, the program was designed to increase their ability to practice in the economic environment of the Green Mountain State, where physician reimbursement tends to lag behind those in other states.

“By significantly reducing the debt burden of the recipients, the Freeman program makes practicing in rural and underserved areas more financially feasible,” says Mildred Reardon, M.D.’67, emerita clinical professor of medicine and the Freeman program director from its inception, at which time she also served as associate dean for primary care. “This program links physicians-in-training with areas in Vermont that have specific needs.”

It was from the outset a long-range program that would follow students through their years of education and three to six years of post-graduate residency training, all the while maintaining a close link between their practice interests and the recruitment needs of hospitals and practices across the state. That work has now borne fruit throughout Vermont, as recent graduates who participated in the Freeman program have filled needs in primary care and a range of other important specialties, including the spot left by Dr. Elliott’s untimely death.
Mary Ready, M.D. ’02 was among the first recipients of the Freeman program’s scholarships. Born in Vermont, she spent much of her childhood in Ohio and Massachusetts, but returned to her grandmother’s house for many long summer vacations. While at boarding school in New Hampshire, she regularly volunteered at the pediatrics ward of a local hospital, and at a nearby nursing home. “I can still tell you things patients at the home said to me,” she recalls. “They were really my earliest teachers of medicine.” Ready earned an undergraduate degree in English from Yale, and taught in Hong Kong for a year. She began taking post-bac pre-med classes with the plan of going directly to med school. Life intervened and, after marrying and having three children, she finally entered the College of Medicine in the fall of 1998. She soon found herself in the clinic at Fletcher Allen. “And I immediately felt — now I’m with my real teachers again,” she recalls.

Ready went off to central Maine for her residency, and right away felt the positive effect of her Freeman scholarship. “We had three young kids and very little money,” she says. “It really helped to have our debt as low as possible.” Decreased debt made it easier for her to come back to Vermont to practice two years ago. She first worked in the Essex County town of Concord and then, last October, joined Corner Medical in Lyndonville. “I think I’m really made to be a doctor in this setting,” she says. “I love seeing my patients both at the office and at the grocery store, too!”

Gregory McCormick, M.D. ’01, has to take a certain amount of care in planning his vacation time. As one of only two cornea specialists in Vermont, he needs to be sure potential patient needs are ready to be met, even on his days off. “And the fact is, I’m usually reachable no matter what — that’s just the way it is if you’re an ophthalmologist in Vermont.” A native of East Burke, McCormick always wanted to return to Vermont to practice after his residency at the University of Rochester. The Freeman program was particularly helpful to him as, in addition to medical school loans, he faced the sizeable cost of establishing a practice that demands rooms full of costly diagnostic equipment.

“None of this is cheap,” he says, gesturing toward a machine in his South Burlington practice that measures retinal thickness. “But all of it is necessary if you want to provide the best level of care.”

Like McCormick, Teresa Fama, M.D. ’02 fills an especially large gap in the healthcare of her region. Before this former Freeman scholar came to Central Vermont Regional Hospital in 2007, after residency and a fellowship at Fletcher Allen Health Care, there had been no full-time rheumatologist in the region for nearly 25 years. Fama came to the College of Medicine from a career in health policy. “I’d always wanted to live in Vermont, and I definitely wanted to stay and practice here.” With Vermont’s population rapidly aging, Fama has no shortage of patients with arthritis and other related illnesses. “I see people from all over central Vermont, and from as far away as Rutland, and up into the Northeast Kingdom.”

Andrew Goodwin, M.D. ’02, knows all about driving long distances to reach a hospital. For the past two years, he has been a “traveling pathologist,” bringing his diagnostic skills to smaller hospitals throughout the northern
The Freeman Legacy Lives On

The Freeman program will continue with the upcoming launch of the Freeman Foundation Legacy Medical Scholarship Program, a chance for all alumni and friends of the College to contribute to scholarship assistance for future physicians. For more information, contact the Medical Development & Alumni Relations office at (802) 656-4014 or medicalgiving@uvm.edu.

Andrew Goodwin, M.D.’02 (at top) often travels 200 miles or more to rural hospitals; Laurel Plante, M.D.’03 (above) in the Rutland Emergency Department.

half of Vermont and the Connecticut Valley. Each week, on the days that he’s not consulting by phone with other doctors, he rises early and is on the road in his car to start an up to 200 mile round trip commute to Northeastern Vermont Regional Hospital in St. Johnsbury, Middlebury’s Porter Medical Center, or northern New Hampshire’s Littleton and Cottage Hospitals. “I love working in these clinical situations,” he says, from the Fletcher Allen office he occupies when not on the road. “And the doctors I work with know that they can talk with me at any time.” On the value of the Freeman scholarship he is very clear — “I always wanted to stay in Vermont, and this help gave me a certain degree of obligation that was good to have.”

As an emergency medicine physician, Steven Lefebvre, M.D.’04 deals with the unexpected every day in the Emergency Department of Southwestern Vermont Medical Center in Bennington. So he appreciates the assistance the Freeman program gave him in overcoming an expected problem — answering the “how will I afford to practice in Vermont?” question. “I was among the first class to receive four years of assistance,” he says. “And the effect was really significant for me.” With three children ages 11 to 17, Lefebvre, who first got his Ph.D. from the College’s Department of Biochemistry, faced significant debt that he feels could have sent him off to another state were it not for the Freeman scholarship. “I had offers from Texas and Alabama, but there was no question, ultimately, that I was coming back here.”

Laurel Plante, M.D.’03 also provides emergency care in her position as medical director for emergency services at Rutland Regional Medical Center. “I always pictured a physician as someone who knew what to do in any situation, and emergency medicine trains you for this — you never know what’s going to come through the door next,” she says. Plante characterizes her Freeman scholarship as “an amazingly generous and important help to me.” While she did her residency at Bay State in Springfield, Mass., Laurel and her husband, Robert, a Vermont firefighter, commuted back-and-forth, which added even more expense to their tight budget. “The Freeman assistance helped us immensely,” she says.

The financial help Laurel and all the other Freeman Scholars received was enhanced by the continuing assistance provided by the program staff members, who kept them in constant touch with potential openings in Vermont as their residency years came to a close. “They were very helpful in my job search, really fantastic in every way — I felt like I always knew every possibility out there,” says Plante.

For Mary Ready, that connection to her current practice was a particularly personal one. “I was privileged to know John Elliott while I practiced in Concord, and some of my patients now were John’s. I feel a responsibility and a connection there. If I can make birth and death less scary, and all the parts in between, then I’ve done what I feel I’ve been put here to do.”

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