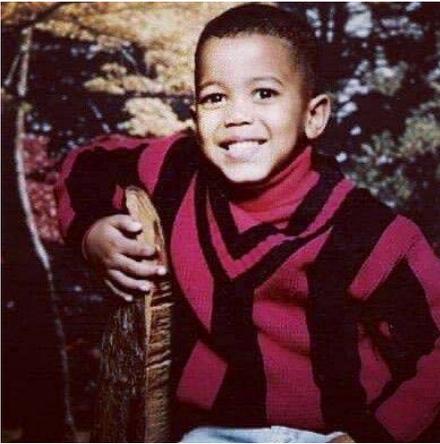


GETTING TO KNOW BYRON MATHIS, MPAS, PA-C

Enterprise Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Newsletter

Byron Mathis, MPAS, PA-C

August 26, 2021



When you accomplish something, it is the journey that makes that achievement special. There are a number of people that play a part in the person that you become. I grew up in the small tight-knit community of Johnston, South Carolina. Many of you may ask, “Where is that?!” Johnston is a small town of about 2500 people where everyone knows everybody. It is about 20 miles north of Aiken, SC and 25 miles east of Augusta, GA, home to Augusta National and the famous Master’s Golf Tournament. Johnston is the “Peach Capital of the World.” Coming from a blue-collar town like Johnston, I witnessed poverty and people that just had enough to get by. My parents taught me at a very young age that obtaining an education was important.

I went to Strom Thurmond High School, named after the long-time United States Senator famed for his ideology for segregation. My experience in high school was far from that. I was extremely active in extra-curricular activities including marching band, Health Occupations Students of America, Future Business Leaders of America, the Beta Club, etc. I gained an interest in science and math because I did exceptionally well in biology, chemistry, and algebra. Late in my 9th grade year, I met my career counselor. She was no nonsense; She would not sugarcoat things, but she was extremely encouraging and had a heart of gold. She really challenged me to think about what I wanted to do for a career and come up with a plan to make it happen.

As a kid, I considered becoming a teacher. When I was a young child, my paternal grandfather looked at me and told me that I was smart and that he could see me becoming a doctor or a lawyer. I wanted to choose a career that was challenging, rewarding, required life-long learning, and one that would garner the respect of my community. In high school, I decided that I wanted to be a doctor. To make that happen, I was told that I had 6 schools to choose from. There were 3 public schools

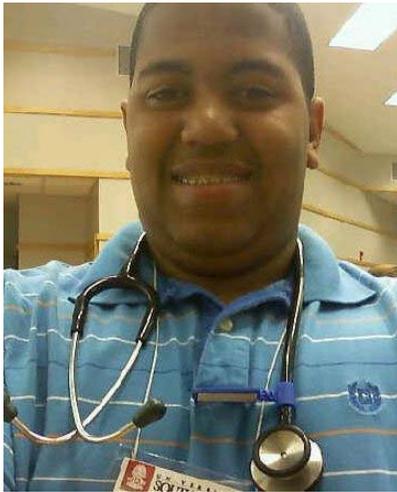


(University of South Carolina, Clemson University, and College of Charleston) and 3 private schools (Furman University, Wofford College, and Presbyterian College). Each school had a high level of success of getting their students into medical school. I chose the University of South Carolina because I had recently become a fan of the Gamecocks football team, I was in love with the campus environment, and my uncle was an alumnus. Lucky for me, I got accepted to my dream school! Go Cocks! I went on to graduate high school with Honors in the graduating Class of 2007. That was step one to reaching my ultimate goal of becoming a doctor.

Leaving high school to go to college was a difficult transition for me. Although I had always been successful, I was the first person in my immediate family to attend college and I was unsure if I could measure up. I was not used to spending time away from my family. But all that I knew was hard work. The great part about it was that it scared me into working hard to get good grades. I began reaching out to local medical schools about the application process and I prepared for the Medical College Admissions Test. This test was daunting and although I did well in the classroom, standardized tests have never been my strong suit. I studied all of the time and did a number of practice tests but I couldn't achieve a score that was sufficient enough to make me competitive for admission to medical school. I had taken the MCAT three times, but I could not pass it. I felt like I let my family down, but most importantly, I felt like I let myself down. In 2011, College graduation came and my family was so excited. It was not only my achievement, but it was theirs, too. Although I was grateful for my journey, deep inside of me was the agony that I did not achieve my dream.

My mom got me to take her to the local medical practice for her annual office visit, and there she saw a physician assistant. My mom was giving me glowing praise by telling him that her son was trying to go to medical school. He asked me, "Have you thought about PA school?" I had seen the name physician assistant, but I did not know much about the profession and associated duties because I had never seen one. He said that PA stands for physician assistant. They see patients, take medical histories, perform physical examinations, order and interpret tests, and write prescriptions. I asked him if I could shadow him to see if that would be the career for me. For an entire month, he allowed me to shadow him. I bombarded him with questions about his salary, what he liked, what he didn't like, and his journey to becoming a PA. Our stories were very similar. We quickly became friends and he became a chief mentor of mine. What I liked about becoming a PA





was the flexibility between specialties that it provided. It was at this moment that I decided to travel down the path of becoming a physician assistant.

As I worked to get prerequisites and patient care hours, I worked as a substitute teacher. I did this for 3 years before working as a pharmacy technician. I knew that I wanted to do something in healthcare to prepare me for PA school. I was given the advice that it would be wise to shadow or work in a pharmacy if I could because it could be helpful in pharmacology. I got my state and national certification to become an emergency medical technician and got more patient care hours.

I applied to 2 PA schools. I got wait-listed by both schools. I tried my best to be patient, but the years kept going by...2012, 2013, 2014, 2015! I began to question what more could I do to gain admission to PA school. I scheduled a meeting with a prospective school. This meeting was with the program director who interviewed me in 2012. I had applied every year since, but I wasn't getting much feedback. I recognized that it was an important day for me to work toward getting into PA school. That meeting did not go as expected.

The director had me wait about 30 minutes after our appointment time before meeting one on one. She pulled my admissions file and we ran down each line item on the list. She told me that my GPA was good, not great. Even though I had recently taken prerequisite courses and made an "A" in each one of them, they were at a technical college, so they wouldn't count for their program because it was seen as taking an easy way out, even though it was to limit cost. She went over my interview from 2012 and talked about what I did well and what I could improve on. They put more pressure on the candidates that were wait-listed because they had the advantage of being through the process before. She went through a list of advanced courses to take, but she threw in that even if I did everything asked of me, she couldn't guarantee admission. I asked if it was worth it to apply again and she told me if she was being honest, I should probably look into doing something else. Barely able to hold back tears, I stood up and graciously told her that I appreciated her honesty and for taking the time to speak with me individually. She did leave me with some words of wisdom and encouragement that I should contact my state school because they usually have more resources to support the students from their state.

To be honest, I had become frustrated with MUSC. The Medical University of South Carolina is prestigious and known for providing a great medical education. It was my dream school! My cousin had

recently graduated from their medical school program. I went to her



graduation and I felt the vibrance of the campus. It was in historic Charleston, South Carolina! The beach, the shops, the food! Each year, the program would take 60 students. Trying to stay hopeful, I



contacted Dr. Gilbert Boissonneault, the program's director. We had met in passing at one of the 4 interviews that I had done. I asked if I could have the opportunity to sit down with him to go over what I can do to finally gain admission into the program. Not only did he graciously accept, but he also threw out the opportunity to be put with a student and go to lectures with him. I jumped at this opportunity. I took off from work and my family and I went down to Charleston for the weekend. I arrived early on Friday morning, eager to make a great impression. I went to lecture from 8:00 AM to 11:30 AM. And from 11:30 to 12:00, I met with Dr. Boissonneault. He was prepared for our meeting. He asked me questions about me as a person and my journey. He encouraged me to apply again. There was one minor negative mistake made during a clinical scenario that caused me to be denied admission. He explained that I would be an outstanding candidate and that I should apply again. I never told anyone, but I decided that this would be my last pursuit of a career as a physician assistant.

That moment never came. Two weeks later, I got the call that I had been waiting for! A spot came open in the class and I was offered admission to the Class of 2018! I was overjoyed to call my mom to give her the great news and she was screaming and jumping up and down in excitement realizing that the moment that we had all been waiting for had finally come!

I had two months before new student orientation to find a place to stay. I was so nervous, yet excited about orientation day. I met some incredible individuals. I carried a chip on my shoulder because I was one of the last members of the class, I was the only African American student in the class, and I came from a small town where this kind of success was unprecedented. I struggled during my first summer semester. The summer semester of 2016 was only about 10 weeks long and we had to learn all of gross anatomy. It was a great bonding moment with my classmates because it taught us to rely on one another to get through it. It came time to vote for student government. I have always been one to push myself. I got the courage to run for

President of the MUSC physician assistant program's class of 2018. To my surprise, I won! I appreciated that my class entrusted me to be the liaison between the students and faculty and direct the path of our program. In July of 2018, I graduated from the MUSC PA Program. When speaking at graduation, I talked about our shared journey and how we would change the lives of so many as we move forward in our illustrious careers.

I got a job offer to work in urgent care with the University Health Care System in Augusta, GA. In urgent care, you are on the front lines of healthcare. It could be a sinus infection, an asthma attack, minor cuts, or chest pain. This was a great specialty to begin my career because it forced me to have to remember everything. I worked in urgent care for 13 months before being offered a position at Augusta Ear, Nose, Throat & Allergy.

Augusta ENT & Allergy is a practice of 15 doctors, but I was hired to be the first physician assistant. I have heard horror stories about being the trailblazer, but my tenacity would not let me turn down this opportunity. I get to work with a great group of physicians. I take care of head and neck pathologies such as sinus infections, ear infections, hearing loss, epistaxis, allergies, reflux, etc. I mainly see current patient follow up office visits and I sometimes assist with surgeries. I have always had an interest in this field because of my own history with asthma and allergies.

My career aspirations have come true. I could not see myself doing anything else. Not everyone gets to wake up every morning and enjoy going to work. All glory goes to God! I would not be here without my village...my family, counselors, community, mentors, and faculty. I have so much more to accomplish in this profession. I wish to pursue a doctorate in medical science. The future of the PA profession includes roles in education, leadership, and clinical practice. I want to be a mentor to others, especially to our future PAs of color. African Americans make up less than 4% of the PA population. African American males make up even less! It is my duty to recruit the future leaders of healthcare. I am currently an executive member of the group Black Physician Assistants of South Carolina. Our mission is to create an avenue of support, mentorship, and shadowing opportunities for African American students that are interested in investigating a career as a physician assistant. We are reaching out to high schools, undergraduate colleges and universities, and physician assistant programs to participate in



career fairs, speaking engagements, and Q&As to introduce students to our great profession. We also want to sit on admissions panels so that we can have a voice in determining the future of our profession.

I hope that my journey can be inspirational to a young Black male like me. Just know, if I can do it, you can too. I was not always the smartest, but I backed it up with hard work and perseverance. Find and lean on your village. You can't go on this journey alone. It will not always be easy, but God will not put more on you than you can bare. In speaking with my younger self, I would say "You have to believe! Not in something tangible, but in the idea that you are good enough to become something that you can't see. You are a King! Chase your dreams and don't let anyone stop you. Your potential is limitless. The world is yours!"



