The lure of the arts

How a diversion became a new direction for one medical student.

BY CARMEN PEOTA

For each of the past 10 years, a handful of medical students at the University of Minnesota have received Fisch Art of Medicine Student Awards—small grants to explore an arts interest. Most find that dedicating a few hours a week to their avocation is a welcome diversion from the demands of medical school and take to heart the lesson that the grant program’s founder, Robert Fisch, M.D., intends they learn: that physicians need an outside interest if they are to maintain their well-being and do well in medicine over the long term.

That has been the case for all but one of the recipients over the years (see p. 16 to read about this year’s group). Ho-Shia Thao found his passion for the arts so strong it pulled him in another direction altogether.

On a whim

If all had gone according to plan, Thao would have used his award to take dance lessons and then graduated from medical school in May along with the rest of the University of Minnesota’s class of 2014. But all did not go according to plan, and Thao was not among those receiving diplomas last spring. “It’s a little bittersweet,” he concedes, taking a deep breath before launching into the story of how and why he decided to become a dancer rather than a doctor.

The Brooklyn Center native had been heading toward medicine since his undergraduate years at Brown University. He had shadowed physicians and done research, written his senior thesis on a topic tangentially related to medicine (Hmong women’s perception of the body) and spent a year working in a Rhode Island hospital. He applied to and was accepted into the University of Minnesota Medical School and started in 2010, fully intending to become a physician.

And he likely would have had his sister not asked him to take a modern dance class with her midway through his first year. The idea of a break from the grind of study appealed to him, and on a whim, Thao agreed. Neither had ever studied any kind of dance. “Originally, it was just the means to explore something—not medicine—or so I thought,” he explains.

Thao, however, found himself not just enjoying the class but loving it. “I remember feeling that I wanted to understand it more,” he says. “I wanted to understand movement and expression.”

He spoke with the instructor, who recommended he learn some fundamentals. Ballet would provide him with the foundation he was seeking. He soon found himself spending many evenings in classes at The Cowles Center for Dance and the Performing Arts in downtown Minneapolis. “Before I knew it, I was falling in love with that art form,” he says.

Thao also found he had a natural faculty for dance. Although he had never before done anything physically demanding other than play a little volleyball, his body seemed well-suited to dance. He progressed quickly. “When people see me, they assume I’ve been dancing for a long time,” he says. “They’re always very surprised that I haven’t.”

He decided to apply for a Fisch award, thinking he would use it to take dance classes over the summer and return to medical school in the fall. “I really thought that because dance had revitalized and energized me, it would be a great way to be motivated [to study],” he says. “Little did I know it was going to become something so much more than that.”

New York, New York

Rather than satiate Thao’s appetite for his newfound art form, the summer of dancing simply whetted it. He applied for and was granted a leave of absence from medical school and then headed to New York, where he found a day job as a project manager for a pharmaceutical company and took as many ballet lessons as he could afford at night. “The beautiful thing about
New York City is that there are dance classes at any time of the day and into the evenings,” he says.

An instructor took Thao under his wing, and at the age of 24, he began to hone his technical skills in classical ballet. “He saw potential in me, regardless of my age,” Thao says of the instructor, acknowledging that he was getting into ballet at an age when many professionals were retiring or contemplating doing so. One year proved not to be enough either to perfect his skills or to quell his desire, so he extended his leave.

Thao returned to Minnesota in 2013 to do his second year of medical school. But he also signed on with the Bloomington-based Continental Ballet. “That’s really when the trouble started for me,” he says. He found himself pulled in two directions. He would attend a rehearsal or a performance and then run back to campus to go to the path lab or the library to catch up on recorded lectures. By mid-year, he was exhausted. “You obviously can’t do both ballet and medical school full time—or at least I really can’t,” he says. “They both require so much daily maintenance and focus, and all your energy and time.”

Thao says it soon became clear to him that he had to make a terribly difficult decision. “I couldn’t dedicate myself to one [pursuit] without really losing the other, which really crushed me.”

After consulting many people and considering his options, he concluded he had only a very small window of time in which to pursue dance. He withdrew from medical school and moved back to New York, where he’s found another day job—this time working for a property management company—and is studying dance in preparation for the upcoming audition season.

Thao knows many are skeptical about his career choice. “Yeah. It’s pretty bold,” he says. And he doesn’t encourage others to do what he’s done. But he’s learned he can’t straddle two separate career paths and feels he’s on the right one for now. “I think for me, I fell into something I was supposed to be doing,” he says. MM

Carmen Peota is an editor of Minnesota Medicine.

Medical students find myriad ways to express their creativity

Ho-Shia Thao was one of the recipients of the Fisch Art of Medicine Student Awards who shared their talents at a celebration of the 2013-2014 awardees at the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis on April 30.

As the audience witnessed, the range of art forms pursued by medical students this year was wider than ever. Among those on display were hand balancing (a circus art requiring the upper-body strength of a gymnast), magic and spoken word as well as filmmaking, dance, music, painting and photography (see full list below).

In a reference to that variety in his closing remarks, Robert Fisch, M.D., quoted Pablo Picasso, who said, “What is art? What isn’t?” He also reminded the audience that he encourages students to open new doors and “exclude nothing.”

Fisch and his wife, Karen Bachman, established the award in 2007 to enable medical students to pursue a creative interest. To make a donation to the fund, contact Sandy Majerus, University of Minnesota Foundation, 612-624-4429.