Each year at a celebration honoring University of Minnesota medical students who have received Fisch Art of Medicine awards (small grants allowing them to pursue an art form), retired pediatrician Robert Fisch, M.D., reminds the audience that he has only one expectation of the students: that they have fun. His deeply held belief is that physicians (and medical students) need to have an outlet, something that he says, “will give them joy to the end of their life.”

For Fisch, one of those somethings is painting. But as this year’s award winners demonstrate, what constitutes fun, let alone art, is very personal. The awards, which ranged in size from about $200 to $2,000, went to students pursuing pastimes ranging from playing the slide guitar to doing aerial arts.

Event emcee Jon Hallberg, M.D., noted at the celebration held at the Mill City Clinic in April that the mix of activities reflected the growing popularity of the seven-year-old program named for Fisch, a former University of Minnesota professor. About 40 students applied; 10 grants were given out. Hallberg said because of the strong interest, applicants are having to be more creative about what they intend to pursue in order to get a grant. For example, fourth-year student John Dunbar finally got one when he proposed using it to learn how to frame art. He had applied earlier to study photography. So had many others.

As they described their reasons for wanting to sing, swing from a trapeze or write prose instead of papers at the celebration, it was clear this year’s crop of winners was an especially fun-loving bunch. Here’s a look at how three of them used their awards.
Jonathan Avila
Two years ago, Jonathan Avila rented a house in St. Paul that came with a piano—not an out-of-tune clunker, but a newish Kawai in perfect condition. To Avila, who grew up in Brazil, this was an opportunity not to be missed. “I was always intrigued by the piano since I was a child. I just thought it was beautiful that people could make music, with their fingers dancing on the piano. So I had asked my parents to enroll me in piano classes. But we don’t learn English in Brazil in school. We have to take private lessons,” he explains. “We had to choose between English and piano, and they thought English would be more practical.”

So knowing nothing about the keyboard or reading music, Avila applied for a Fisch award so he could take lessons. He didn’t get an award his first time, but did so during his fourth and final year at the university. He found a piano teacher who could give him lessons on Saturdays and set what he thought was the reasonable goal of practicing 20 minutes a day. Instead of struggling to meet that, he discovered he loved playing so much, he’d often practice much longer.

“I finished the entire adult learner book,” Avila says, proudly sharing that he even gave a little recital for his family when they came for his graduation. He says they were surprised that he chose medical school as the time to learn to play an instrument. But Avila told them it was a great way to relax. “If I came home from the ED, and there had been lots of trauma, I would just sit at the piano and play songs and things would seem all right,” he says.

Avila says he expected learning to play the piano to be sort of like learning a language. “I was very surprised at how much fun I had and how much it’s opened to me a whole new world that’s out there.” He plans to continue studying, even as he moves on to residency in pediatrics in Columbus, Ohio.

Fortunately, he will not have to bid farewell to the Kawai. His landlord was so pleased someone was using the piano that she gave it to him. Along with the piano, he’s taking with him Book 2 in the adult learner series.

Laura McCarthy
Before she was a medical student, Laura McCarthy studied Spanish in Guatemala. During that time, she’d occasionally go salsa dancing. “I only took a handful of lessons when I was down there, but it sparked my interest,” she says, explaining that it seemed to fill a gap created when she stopped doing gymnastics after a dozen years.
Alexander Ringeisen

When Alexander Ringeisen was in the 10th grade in Lakeville, Minnesota, his high school choir teacher introduced him to barbershop singing, the style characterized by four-part, close harmony. He and three friends formed a quartet, and for the next eight years, they sang together and took part in local and national competitions. (The Barbershop Harmony Society and other organizations sponsor competitions for youths and adults across the country and around the world.) But the quartet disbanded about the time Ringeisen went to medical school.

When Ringeisen learned about the Fisch award program, he saw a chance to get back to singing. “It was such a great opportunity to get back into something that I used to be passionate about,” says Ringeisen, who graduated and is starting a residency in ophthalmology at the University of Wisconsin. He used his award money to take voice lessons to get his voice back into shape and regain his confidence (he sings lead). He bought music and formed the new quartet OnChord.

Because one member lives in San Francisco and the others are in the Twin Cities, they practiced “together” some of the time by emailing recordings to each other. Their distance approach paid off, and the quartet qualified to compete next fall in a competition in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Ringeisen says singing in a barbershop quartet requires commitment. “You really have to practice a lot. With only four voices, one person making a mistake or not doing something at the right time can really throw off a performance.” Mostly, though, he says it’s just fun. “There’s definitely a nerve-wracking component, but as soon as you start singing, it goes back to all the practice you’ve been doing and it really becomes fun.”

And like Fisch, Ringeisen doesn’t think fun is frivolous. “I’m a pretty firm believer that everybody should have not just one but multiple interests outside of medicine. It can help you stay grounded.” MM