

Catalyst Profile
Dustin Washburn

Dustin Washburn, who graduated from WCU in 2011, is a volunteer fire fighter-turned-medical student and is doing a world of good right here in Western North Carolina. At 15 years old, the WCU alumnus dove headfirst into volunteering, choosing to trim apple trees for patients at Westcare Hospice in Waynesville, North Carolina and to file paperwork at the Good Samaritan Clinic in Sylva, North Carolina.

Now, with graduation from the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University in sight, he is gearing up for a lifelong profession of service as a doctor in emergency medicine.

“It was all humbling and very rewarding,” said Washburn of his experiences at end-of-life care facilities and low-income health centers. “It pointed me in the right direction.”

Though nonprofit work primed his career aspirations, this Marion, North Carolina native also found guidance in Cullowhee. After working as a full-time paramedic for three years in McDowell County, Washburn enrolled in WCU’s biology program, choosing to pursue a degree through the Honors College.

It was there that he met Emily Sharpe, an adviser-turned-mentor who was “always happy to meet to discuss career goals and future endeavors.” Over in Stillwell, microbiology professor Seán O’Connell provided Washburn with research opportunities that “sparked” his “continuous ambition” for R&D.

Beyond the classroom, he also served as president of the Pre-Health Professional Club and helped found the WCU chapter of Alpha Epsilon Delta, a pre-medical honors fraternity. Still, much of the former Catamount’s time was spent working as a volunteer firefighter back home, hiking in the Great Smoky Mountains and, of course, studying.

“College is about learning who you are and becoming independent,” said Washburn. “But keep in mind that your grades will impact you when it comes to graduate school.”

And after applying to nine medical schools in his senior year, this former Catamount got his top pick—East Carolina University.

Though Washburn will begin his emergency medical residency come May, he is still baffled by his progress, both academically and professionally. As a first-generation college student from a family of five, he did not expect to someday march to “Pomp and Circumstance.” In fact, the pursuit of higher education was uncommon in his small hometown.

“The road to where I am has not been easy. It has shown me how ambition can pay off and to not underestimate one’s own potential,” said Washburn. “No current student should underestimate the goals they can achieve.”

According to Washburn, a bit of hard work and perseverance can make a world of difference.