

Brittany Van Ness – Personal Statement Draft 2

Prior to starting medical school, I set out to walk the entire Appalachian Trail, a 2,200-mile-long trail leading from Georgia to Maine. Though I had minimal backpacking experience, this had been a dream of mine for many years and I felt that I was up for the challenge. This trek, however, ended up giving me so much more than just sunburnt shoulders and blistered feet. I felt cleansed being away from the “real world” with time to reflect on my future aspirations and values. I met countless strangers who reminded me that kindness is at the core of humankind. I met college kids taking a gap year from school and retired people fulfilling their life-long dream. I met ex-soldiers trying to cope with their PTSD and people who struggled with anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder. All of these people reminded me that my dream did not end after I finished climbing the final mountain. My goal was to someday be able to care for people like those I met on the trail who struggled with mental health illness.

Although my time on the Appalachian Trail deepened my interest in the importance of mental health, my passion first started when I worked in a hospital as a patient care technician. I was commonly assigned to sitting in patients’ rooms who were thought to be a danger to themselves, generally due to a mental health illness. I found myself talking with most patients about their feelings and the events that led up to their hospitalization. Patients were willing to share the story of their illness and I was greatly saddened to learn the amount of suffering many had endured. Additionally, I wanted the ability to do more for these patients in addition to simply listening to their complaints. I wanted to be a part of their care-team and be an advocate for them. This interest continued to develop after starting medical school and learning the science behind the development of many psychiatric illnesses. After only a handful of days working on the psychiatric ward, I was certain that I wanted to pursue psychiatry as my medical specialty.

During my third year of medical school I was chosen to participate in my school’s rural medicine program. This pathway involved spending nine months learning clinical medicine and living as the sole medical student in a town of 3,500 people in rural South Dakota. Though my assigned community did not have a practicing or outreach psychiatrist, I observed and helped care for mental health issues almost daily. Additionally, I spent one month at an outreach clinic on a nearby Native American reservation that was plagued by high rates of substance abuse and suicide. I found this experience to be difficult not only due to these issues but because we had few resources to offer patients. Like my time as a patient care technician, this experience has molded my intentions for a future in psychiatry and has influenced my desire to provide care to underserved populations.

Recently the Appalachian Trail community endured a great tragedy after a hiker suffering from a psychotic episode attacked multiple hikers, one of whom did not survive. This man, who went by the trail-name “Sovereign,” had threatened hikers in the past, however, due to the discomfort that surrounds mental illness his behavior was ignored. Though I am greatly saddened by the event it also continues to remind me why I am pursuing a future in psychiatry. It is because of these reminders as well as my passion for mental health and endurance to face difficulties that will allow me to be successful during residency training. My hope for the future is to have the knowledge and ability to advocate and treat patients such as Sovereign so that instead of living a life of a criminal he can pursue his dreams, such as walking the Appalachian Trail.