THE DAILY CLIPS

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Local teens accepted into medical school

BY KIM GRIZZARD
The Daily Reflector

Two Greenville teens are getting a chance to go to medical school, and they haven’t even begun their undergraduate studies.

Sixteen-year-old Arun Ajmera and 18-year-old Matt Edwards are among four students selected for the Early Assurance Program at the Brody School of Medicine. Early Assurance, launched a decade ago at East Carolina University, reserves medical school seats four years in advance for participating students.

“The rationale for doing it was to help attract the best and brightest to ECU for their undergraduate education, and I think that’s certainly helped,” said Dr. James G. Peden Jr., associate dean for admissions at the Brody School of Medicine. “I suspect we got several students who might have been successfully recruited elsewhere.”

Though there is no financial incentive directly associated with the Early Assurance program, there is a valuable attraction. As long as they maintain certain academic standards... See EARLY, A9

EARLY

Continued from A1

and participate in the program’s medical school partnerships, Early Assurance students are exempt from taking the Medical College Admission Test.

While a number of medical schools across the nation have provisional acceptance programs, ECU has the only medical school in the state that partners with its undergraduate campus to offer guaranteed acceptance to high school seniors. Peden recalls some initial skepticism when undergraduate officials first suggested that the medical school should begin interviewing merit scholars as potential candidates for medical school.

“We were a little hesitant at first thinking, ‘How are we going to be able to tell with people coming right out of high school whether they’re going to be good candidates for medical school four years down the road?’” Peden said.

“But as it turned out, it’s been an unqualified success.

“We’ve been very pleased over the past decade with the students we’ve chosen for Early Assurance and the success that they’ve had,” he said. “Early assurance scholars have typically been at the top of the classes and have been some of our best students.”

Among them is Mary Windham, who was selected for the Early Assurance program in 2004 when she graduated from Farmville Central High School and went on to become a Brody Scholar, the medical school’s highest honor. Now in her second year of medical school, Windham mentors an Early Assurance participant who is hoping to follow the same path.

“You definitely get a lot more personalized guidance than you would otherwise get,” Windham said, adding that she was able to spend time in medical laboratories and classrooms while she was still and undergraduate student. “The program is very supportive.”

The early involvement with the medical school environment appears to be one factor in the success of the program. From the first five classes of Early Assurance participants or alternates, 33 of 40 have advanced to medical school.

“That’s 18 percent (of students not advancing),” Peden said, “which is much less than the typical freshman pre-med class that shrinks to about half its size by sophomore year and half the size of that by junior year.”

With such a retention rate, the university has plans to expand the program next fall, extending Early Assurance to students at two other schools in the University of North Carolina system. Beginning in 2011, N.C. A&T State University and UNC Pembroke are each expected to begin selecting two Early Assurance participants every year. Early Assurance students at those schools will have the same opportunity as ECU participants to enter the Brody School of Medicine when they graduate.

Kathleen Hilton, associate vice chancellor for academic planning at UNC Pembroke, believes the program will help attract future physicians who might have otherwise overlooked Pembroke.

“I think sometimes students feel like they have a better chance getting into medical schools from other institutions,” she said. “What this will do is to make Pembroke a more attractive option for their undergraduate degree.”

Peden hopes that, ultimately, Early Assurance partnerships at all three schools will help attract primary care physicians who are trained in the state to remain in the state to practice. The first Early Assurance scholars graduated from medical school in 2007, with a few completing their undergraduate degree in three years. These same Early Assurance participants should complete their residencies and join or establish practices this year.

“Most of the students from UNC Pembroke that come to medical school here end up going into primary care and returning to their home community and fulfilling the mission of the (Brody) school,” Peden said. “We’re pretty mission driven over here ... We’re trying to get health care for eastern North Carolina and other regions of the state that need more doctors.”
Medical school now a reality for local teenagers

BY KIM GRIZZARD
The Daily Reflector

Both Arun Ajmera and Matt Edwards have wanted to become doctors since they were kids — which really wasn’t that long ago.

Now, as the two prepare to graduate from high school, they have a chance to do more than dream. Ajmera, 16, and Edwards, 18, will enter East Carolina University this fall as the Early Assurance program, which offers provisional acceptance for select scholars to the Brody School of Medicine once they graduate from ECU.

For Edwards, the opportunity seemed too good to pass up, even though he was a scholarship candidate at several schools.

“It’s getting so increasingly difficult to get into medical school these days,” he said. “They want to see research. They want to see you’ve been out in the world. Knowing that I’m in and knowing that I won’t have to go through the application process … it’s a very big opportunity.”

To be considered for Early Assurance, students must have SAT scores of 1800 or better and be ranked in the top 5 percent of their graduating class.

Edwards, of D.H. Conley, and Ajmera, of J.H. Rose, are honor students with similar resumés. Both are members of the Health Science Academy, Health Occupations Students of America, the National Honor Society, and science and English honor societies at their respective schools. The two teens were members of their school tennis teams, and both served on the city’s Youth Council.

Edwards, the son of Bill and Susan Edwards, attended North Carolina Governor’s School. He is an Eagle Scout and the recipient of the President’s Volunteer Service Award.

Ajmera, son of Shiv and Rejnie Ajmera, is completing high school early. He is a member of the Tar River Community Band and volunteers at Pitt County Memorial Hospital and Shepard Memorial Library.

By staying close to home, Ajmera hopes to continue some of the service work he began at a young age.

“I chose East Carolina University so that I would be able to continue some of the community projects I began here, like raising funds for Children’s Hospital,” he said. “I was born and raised in Greenville, so East Carolina University’s campus was always a second home for me growing up.”
First memorial scholarship awarded

WINNER OF the 2010 Charles Andrew "Drew" Kirby Scholarship, Rhonda Harper, center, stands with J.H. Rose High School History teacher Steven Hill, left, and Michaelangelo's Owner Jeff Deering inside the Michaelangelo's on Fifth Street on Thursday. A painting of Drew Kirby hangs above the door honoring the former manager, who was fatally shot in the summer of 2009.

Kirby was killed in a downtown shooting

BY GINGER LIVINGSTON
The Daily Reflector

Friends and co-workers of a Greenville man shot to death last summer surprised a J.H. Rose High School senior Thursday with a scholarship honoring his spirit and work ethic.

Rhonda Harper, 17, learned she'll receive the first Charles Andrew "Drew" Kirby Scholarship during today's Awards Day ceremony at J.H. Rose High School.

Rose history teacher Steven Hill, a long-time friend of Kirby's, took Harper to the downtown Michaelangelo's location that Kirby managed.

DONATE
To make a donation to help the Drew Kirby scholarship fund, send a check to:
Charles Andrew Kirby Scholarship Fund
c/o Frances Young
Pitt County Schools
1717 W. Fifth St.
Greenville, NC 27834

at the time of his death to give her the news.

They met business' owner, Jeff Deering, and Hill gave Deering a framed document announcing Harper won the $500 stipend. Then they visited the restaurant's other locations to meet Kirby's co-workers.

"I wasn't putting two and two together. I was like, 'Oh my, Mr. Hill wants to meet me for pizza,'" Harper said.

"I didn't really realize what it was until I saw the paper."

Harper said she will use the scholarship to purchase books and other school supplies when she attends East Carolina University in the fall. She plans to major in family and consumer services with the goal of becoming a family therapist. She hopes to open a business that incorporates dance, music and the

See KIRBY, A9
Kirby

Continued from A1

arts with therapeutic services.

Kirby, 29, and Landon Blackley, 21, where killed June 30 outside The Other Place nightclub on Fifth Street. Kirby had just closed the restaurant he had been managing for four months and was talking with friends when shots from a passing BMW hit him.

James Earl Richardson, 33, a former professional basketball player from Greenville who had been ejected from the club with several other men, has been charged in the killings. He faces two counts of first-degree murder. Prosecutors are seeking the death penalty.

Harper said she didn’t remember the shooting and was shocked by the story. It saddened her to know that Hill, Deering and so many other people lost a friend, she said.

Kirby’s friends have held fundraisers in his honor to seed the scholarship, including benefit concerts in Greenville.

Seeing that such a loss inspired so many people to create something life-affirming and beneficial will inspire Harper to work even harder, she said.

“It’s so awesome to see people care so much about someone that they would create a scholarship to honor them,” she said. “To be the first person to receive the scholarship, it’s such an honor.”

Deering and Hill said Kirby’s friends wanted to establish a scholarship because it exemplifies what was best about their friend.

“He was energetic, a hard-worker, and this was a good way to keep his name alive, his memory alive,” Hill said. “He would appreciate Rhonda’s level of hard work.”

Harper is active in Rose’s theater arts program and in a number of church activities, he said. She sings in her church choir, is working to start a church dance troop and works with younger teens in her church. She also eventually wants to participate in mission programs organized by her church pastor.

Hill met Kirby shortly after moving to Greenville in 2000 when they were part of a bowling team, and Hill became a regular customer at Michaelangelo’s.

“That’s how Kirby was,” Deering said. “Yes, you were a customer but you were also a friend.” Deering opened the downtown location in part because Kirby wanted to eventually become a co-owner of the location.

Harper was one of six students who applied for the scholarship, Hill said. It was designed to go to a Rose senior planning to attend ECU who has displayed a superior academic and stellar work ethic in and out of school, he said.

Harper learned about the scholarship from Hill.

“I was in choral class and Mr. Hill walked in,” she said. “All I hear him say was ‘ECU scholarship’ and I said, ‘I’ll do it!’”

Deering displays a portrait of Kirby in the downtown restaurant. After introducing Harper, Hill presented Deering with a framed document featuring her photograph and a synopsis of the scholarship to hang at the restaurant. The goal is to present similar documents to Michaelangelo’s with each new scholarship recipient, Hill said.

Kirby would be pleased to know Harper received a scholarship bearing his name, Deering said.

“He would have loved her. She looks like she has a great personality and certainly fits the criteria,” he said. “She sets the bar high for future candidates.”
Senate budget is hitting home

By JONATHAN CLAYBORNE
Staff Writer

The N.C. Senate lent final approval to its adjustment of the two-year state budget in a 30-16 vote Thursday.

Now, the budget moves to the state House, where appropriations subcommittees and committees will work on asserting House budget-writers’ preferences and ironing out differences in the spending plans favored by the majority in each chamber.

“This year, as in most years, the House and the Senate priorities are pretty well aligned with each other as well as with what the governor wants to do,” said Bill Holmes, spokesman for House Speaker Joe Hackney, D-Orange.

The road map for 2010-2011 spending won’t be finalized until it has been voted on by the House and signed into law by Gov. Beverly Perdue, Holmes noted.

House and Senate leaders have voiced their desire to wrap up the budget work before the current fiscal year ends June 30.

Among items of local interest in the Senate’s view of the budget is a $350,000 allocation to help with the Town of Belhaven’s harbor project.

Reached for comment Thursday, Town Manager Guinn Leverett said he and the town finance officer were busy crafting Belhaven’s budget for the next fiscal year and hadn’t had a chance to review the Senate’s numbers.

The Belhaven harbor project, or Wynne’s Gut Gateway, as it has been dubbed by Leverett, includes three waterfront endeavors: construction of dockage downstream from Wynne’s Gut creek, restoration of the watershed upstream from the creek and replacement of the Water Street bridge.

The Senate budget lowers funding for the Aurora Fossil Museum and some other nonprofit facilities getting money through the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

The museum’s state support would be scaled back by $2,894, for a total of $54,981.

“You know what? It’s not that bad of a cut, and as long as we can continue to have people support us we will make it,” said Andrea Stilley, museum director.

“Any time you can’t depend on money you’re concerned, and that’s why you try to be as self-sufficient as possible,” Stilley added.

The reduction in funding under the Grassroots Science Program wouldn’t likely lead to the elimination of museum events, but, with less cash on hand, those programs might not expand as the staff would have liked, she said.
Public schools statewide would take a hit in some of the Senate's line items.

The Associated Press reported Wednesday that schools would suffer a 3-percent reduction, around $219 million less than the current allocation.

School districts would also be charged with trimming another $80 million on their own, The Associated Press reported.

The budget contains a maximum, two-day furlough for teachers "as a very last resort" in order to avoid layoffs, related Schorr Johnson, spokesman for Sen. Marc Basnight, D-Dare.

Basnight is president pro tempore of the Senate.

The furlough would have to occur on a "noninstructional" day, when no classes were scheduled, and school boards would be obligated to hold public hearings before instituting the days off, Johnson indicated.

School districts requested the furlough as a contingency for "when they have tried every other angle to try to keep teachers in the classroom and save teaching jobs," he commented.

The furlough would not be mandated by the state, according to Johnson.

"The budget does everything possible to try to keep teachers in the classroom and avoid teacher layoffs," he said. "It provides some flexibility to local school districts to do everything they can to save teaching jobs."

Don Phipps, superintendent of Beaufort County Schools, declined immediate comment because he hadn't had an opportunity to read through the budget, said BCS spokeswoman Sarah Hodges.

The monetary blueprint signed off on by the Senate would let more than 80 percent of the state's small businesses enjoy the same tax rate as large corporations, Johnson said.

Each small business would have to have up to $850,000 in cumulative gross income to take advantage of the tax-rate reduction, he said.

"We recognize that this is just one effort, but in a budget where almost half a billion has to be cut, this is something that Sen. Basnight and the leadership wanted to do," Johnson added.

The Senate's nod toward expediting the budgeting process comes in a period of slow tax collections and other problems brought on by the Great Recession.

The general-fund appropriations would amount to more than $18.9 billion, leaving an unappropriated balance in excess of $5.2 million.

Community Editor Greg Katski and Staff Writer Betty Mitchell Gray contributed to this story. For more on the budget, see future editions.

Items of area interest

in budget adjustment

OK'd by the N.C. Senate:

- $54,981 for the Aurora Fossil Museum, which is $2,894 less than the 2009-2010 appropriation.
- $350,000 for the Belhaven harbor project.
- $3.61 million for renovations to boating-access areas statewide.
• less money for the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center — from more than $4.6 million down to more than $3.9 million.

• $6.1 million for capital improvements — Life Sciences Building advance planning at East Carolina University.

Source: State budget documents available online at the N.C. General Assembly’s Web site
PUBLIC FORUM

Housing statistics not total picture

Your May 11 front-page article on rents and local housing referenced statistics that could be easily misinterpreted and may appear misleading.

First, the “average” two-bedroom monthly rent is cited at $640, but that figure is then portrayed as unaffordable to someone with minimum-wage earnings. By definition, these individuals earn the minimum wage, not the average wage. A minimum-wage earner shouldn’t expect to have an average-level standard of living by affording an average-priced rental, so comparing minimum to average is illogical. Further, would minimum-wage earners necessarily need two bedrooms? Isn’t it more likely they’d either be sharing the rent with another wage-earner, or would require only a one-bedroom unit for an efficiency?

The Reflector housing section that same day showed a number of classified ads for one-bedrooms (some including utilities, some furnished) from the mid-$300s to under $300 monthly.

While DeDe Carney, the real-estate agent quoted, is absolutely correct about how people should budget their money wisely, spending with frugality, (e.g., I’m always amazed at how many low-income individuals have the newest cell phones and other techno-gizmos, yet they struggle to pay their rent and utilities), I respectfully disagree with her point about housing being unaffordable. Within the past few years, developers overbuilt Greenville apartments anticipating increased housing needs would result from higher ECU enrollments, but they failed to account for the proportion of online-students who have no need for local housing.

With the economy still struggling, prices are still dropping. In fact, the article presents a 32.5 percent increase in the cost of two-bedroom rentals since year 2000 as if it were a sizable increase. Yet, when reduced to a compound annual rate over that 10-year period, it translates to an average increase of only 2.85 percent per year, less than the recorded rate of inflation.

DR. ROBERT PRATI
ECU Department of Finance
Greenville
Ted Kushnick

Dr. Ted Kushnick died May 1, 2010 in Greenville. Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., Dr. Kushnick was a Professor of Pediatrics and Director of the Developmental Evaluation Center at ECU. During WWII, he served on a battleship in the Navy. In more recent years, he and his wife, Judy, each had their pilots' license and enjoyed flying.

In Greenville, Ted is survived by his wife, Judy; many friends and colleagues in medicine and in the Jewish Community to which he was devoted. He is also survived by his friend and devoted caregiver of many years, Judi Willis.

A memorial service will be held at Congregation Bayt Shalom at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 25, 2010, led by Rabbi Alyssa Stanton. All who wish to share memories and mementos of Ted are encouraged to bring or e-mail them to baytshalom@gmail.com.

Donations may be made to J. Bernstein Medical Center, 7 Professional Dr., Snow Hill, NC 28580, or Congregation Bayt Shalom, P.O. Box 2713, Greenville, NC 27836.
Physician assistants drawn to specialty

A shortage of primary care doctors is expected to grow as the nation's health care overhaul unfolds, increasing the demand for physician assistants and other midlevel caregivers to provide basic care.

But many physician assistants are steering clear of primary care - the prime original target of their profession.

Instead, they're heading in increasing numbers to more lucrative specialties such as surgery and emergency medicine, following the doctors' lead.

"It's not just what they're choosing to do, but where the market is hiring," said Perri Morgan, director of P.A. research at the Duke University Physician Assistant Program.

Morgan and colleagues studied the job choices of physician assistants from 1997 to 2006. The results, published in the latest edition of the journal Health Affairs, found that the number of physician assistants going into primary care declined to 41 percent in 2005, from 54 percent in 1996.

Although primary care remains the leading career choice, physician assistants have been hired in droves to provide basic services in orthopedic surgery, dermatology, emergency medicine and other specialties.

The reasons are often economic. Such care is expensive, so hospitals, clinics and private doctor practices have hired P.A.s to handle many medical procedures at a fraction of the cost charged by a cardiologist or neurosurgeon.

"There's a good argument to make that physician assistants in specialty care may be economically good," Morgan said.

At the same time, she said, the trend could make it harder for people to find basic treatment, particularly in rural and poor communities.

The job of physician assistant was created in the 1970s to provide that care. Physician assistants were trained to treat ear infections, diagnose poison ivy, do strep cultures and provide other routine treatment in regions that have had trouble attracting doctors. P.A.s work under a doctor's supervision, freeing the doctors for more complex problems.

Today, about 120,000 physician assistants are licensed, compared with about 820,000 doctors. In the nine years covered in the Duke study, the number of physician assistants doubled, so the influx into primary care has been significant, despite the number of P.A.s choosing specialty care.

Mary Houston, a P.A. in Wilson who graduated last year from Duke, said she was never tempted to go into specialty care, despite the prospect of making more money.

"I'm definitely committed to primary care - I feel that should be our priority," Houston said. "But it's very challenging being a primary care provider."
Rural challenges

The challenges are especially formidable in the communities P.A.s traditionally serve. At Houston's clinic, 70 percent of patients are uninsured, causing many to put off doctor visits until they're in crisis and their care is more complicated.

Mike Borden, chief executive officer of the N.C. Academy of Physician Assistants, said meeting the primary care needs of poor communities should remain the top priority of physician assistants.

He said the issue of physician assistants in specialty care has become contentious. Last year, the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants sparked debate when it announced it would begin offering a separate designation for those who work in surgery and other specialties.

Specialty certification

The new specialty certification, which will require additional coursework, will go into effect in 2011.

Borden's academy, along with the profession's national academy, instead favors the traditional model, with caregivers serving poor and rural communities where access to doctors is limited.

"We believe in staying traditional, but we also recognize that specialty certification is where P.A.s are increasingly going," Borden said.

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The pain of Bartonella

A bacterial infection typically spread by fleas, lice and biting flies could be more prevalent than many think, and may have been transmitted from a mother to her children at birth, scientists from N.C. State University say.

Dr. Edward Breitschwerdt, an infectious disease veterinarian and one of the world's leading researchers of bacteria called Bartonella, has for the first time documented evidence that the pathogen may have been passed between family members.

Although more studies are needed to back up his findings, Breitschwerdt and colleagues describe the case of a mother and father who began battling chronic aches, fatigue and other symptoms soon after they were married. When their twins were born in 1998, the daughter died after nine days from a heart defect, and the son developed chronic health problems.

Using tissue from the daughter's autopsy and blood from the surviving family members, Breitschwerdt's team discovered that the entire family was infected with the same species of Bartonella bacteria, despite having no shared exposures to flea or lice infestations. Bartonella is known to cause such illnesses as trench fever and cat scratch disease, and it is increasingly suspected of triggering a variety of aches and inflammations that doctors have been unable to diagnose.

"I think we have stumbled across something that is of monumental medical importance," said Breitschwerdt, whose findings were published recently in the Journal of Clinical Microbiology.

Proving the mother-child transmission could be difficult, however. Little funding is available for such research because the bacteria are still not considered a major source of human disease.

Dr. Michael Kosoy, who heads the Bartonella laboratory for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Fort Collins, Colo., said scientists are only beginning to build evidence that Bartonella infections may be more common than previously thought.

"Bartonella are circulated around the world in many animals, but there are different Bartonella species, and the question is how can they be transmitted to humans?" Kosoy said, noting that most known cases have been transmitted from biting insects. He said the NCSU findings about the potential family transmission are compelling but inconclusive.

Dozens of strains

At least 26 strains of Bartonella have been named worldwide, and the list is growing. The most notorious Bartonella infection is cat scratch disease, a fever illness passed to humans from flea-infected cats. Fleas are the primary hosts, and they spread the bacteria in their feces.

Other Bartonella strains spread more serious diseases. Kosoy is studying how often heart inflammation is caused by a Bartonella that thrives among rat fleas in Thailand. He has already established that about 25 percent of unexplained fever illnesses among a group of patients there was caused by Bartonella.
"This is not limited to cat scratch," Kosoy said. "That's just the tip of the iceberg."

Breitschwerdt said he thinks the bacteria may be the hidden cause behind a host of chronic symptoms - muscle aches, neurological problems, fatigue, arthritis - that defy diagnosis.

About two years ago, Breitschwerdt began testing blood samples from a doctor in Maryland, who was curious whether Bartonella infections might be causing problems for some of his patients.

"There are lab tests showing inflammation," but no discernible cause, said Dr. Robert Mozayeni, a Yale-educated rheumatologist who practices in Rockville, Md.

Mozayeni contacted Breitschwerdt and his NCSU colleague, Ricardo Maggi, who together developed a more sensitive test for Bartonella. Routine blood tests fail to detect Bartonella because they search for antibodies that the body is slow to produce.

Instead, Breitschwerdt and Maggi figured out how to cultivate the bacteria in the laboratory from blood samples of infected people. They founded a company called Galaxy Diagnostics to handle the laboratory volume.

Of Mozayeni's mystery patients tested at the lab, nearly 20 percent had Bartonella infections.

"I suspect this is going to be one of the causes of rheumatoid arthritis and a few other things, but it's too speculative right now to say," Mozayeni said.

Human testing

More studies are needed, and Mozayeni has joined Breitschwerdt and Maggi in the diagnostic company to oversee human testing.

"Certainly, the prevalence of Bartonella infection in people with chronic illness is higher than I would have ever guessed, but we still don't know what that means," Breitschwerdt said.

Among the biggest unknowns is how to treat people who have been infected. The effectiveness of antibiotics depends on which strain of Bartonella is at work, and with so many strains, treatments can be hit or miss.

Breitschwerdt said the family in his most recent study declined to comment about their experience. He said they were having difficulty finding a doctor.

"It is very difficult to find a physician who wants to see someone with a chronic illness that is poorly defined," he said, adding that many such patients often think they have Lyme disease, a tick-borne bacterial infection with similar symptoms - and stigma. "With an unexplained illness, it becomes problematic."

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Coming out is costly for cadet at UNC-CH

CHAPEL HILL -- Though she has long wanted to be an Army doctor, Sara Isaacson says she also wants to live an honest life. So on Jan. 25, the UNC-Chapel Hill ROTC cadet handed her commander a written statement revealing that she is a lesbian.

Doing so ended her military career and will likely cost her more than $79,000. That's what she owes the federal government, which was paying for her UNC-CH schooling - at out-of-state rates - while the Wisconsin native went through her military training.

"I've dreamed since I was 13 of a career as a military officer," Isaacson said this week. "But I knew I wouldn't be OK with myself if I had to lie every day."

Since outing herself, the 21-year-old has become a fresh face in the national movement that opposes the "don't ask, don't tell" law, which mandates the dismissal of openly gay, lesbian or bisexual members of the military. Isaacson has been to Washington twice to lobby members of Congress, and a national group that provides legal counsel to service members is using her story to condemn the law. Their cause is gathering steam. President Barack Obama has called for its repeal, and high-ranking members of the military have backed him.

Meanwhile, Isaacson needs a new life plan. The old one, which started with ROTC and included medical school and a career in the Army, is gone.

Isaacson realized last fall that she is a lesbian. There was no moment of epiphany, just a slow light turning on to finally provide her some clarity. She was in her seventh semester at UNC-CH, a senior enjoying her ROTC leadership role. If she had stayed quiet, she would have graduated this year and been commissioned - an ambition she has held since hearing stories from her grandfather, an Army doctor in post-World War II Okinawa, Japan.

Although the don't ask, don't tell rule prohibits the military from asking service members about their sexual preferences, it also mandates that gays not make their orientation public. Isaacson said the law would have forced her to evade questions or situations or even to lie about them. For example, she couldn't list a partner as next of kin on official documentation, she said.

Although Isaacson believed she was straight until last year, she said she was a vocal supporter of gay rights. In high school in suburban Milwaukee, she was involved in the distribution of a controversial "Heterosexual Questionnaire." It asked students questions like "When did you decide you were a heterosexual?" according to a local news report at the time.

Drawn by a strong undergraduate sciences program, Isaacson chose UNC-CH over the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and Northwestern University. She was among the top five students in a high school class of 215, and she first came to UNC-CH on an academic scholarship that was eventually replaced by the federal funds.
She's been busy in college. Along with her ROTC classes and early morning workouts three days a week, the chemistry major has been a resident assistant, worked with a sexual assault prevention group and played the piccolo in the marching band.

She does not have a partner.

Fervor for repeal

Had Isaacson chosen silence, it might not have been forever. In his first State of the Union Address, Obama announced his desire to repeal don't ask, don't tell, and the Pentagon began a yearlong study of the ramifications. Nearly 200 members of the U.S. House of Representatives have signed onto a bill that would repeal the law.

Since 1994, about 13,500 members of the military have been dismissed under the policy, according to the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, the Washington-based organization that has used Isaacson's story in its fight for repeal of the policy. The organization hears from a few students each year in situations similar to Isaacson's, said Trevor Thomas, a spokesman for the group.

Though the financial implications are jarring, Isaacson said she isn't trying to get out of the repayment. Her case is now being considered by Cadet Command, the military office that runs ROTC programs nationwide. There, someone will decide how she'll repay the $79,265.14 that the government has spent on her education.

The terms of Isaacson's deal with the military are clear, said Mike Johnson, a Cadet Command spokesman.

"To accept the scholarship, the kid signs a contract and agrees to serve X years in the U.S. Army," he said.

No 'rash decision'

Even after coming out, Isaacson had a chance to get back into the Army's good graces.

"A lot of college students are still trying to figure out what they want to do with their lives," said her commander, Lt. Col. Monte Yoder, who directs the ROTC program at UNC-CH. "I asked her if she wanted to withdraw her letter. But she clearly wanted not to be involved in the military at all."

Isaacson said she does want to serve, if the Army will accept her as she is.

"I would definitely still want to serve as an officer," she said. "This is something I've dreamed of for eight years. That doesn't go away."

Isaacson's decision was a long, wrenching process. She talked at length with her parents and campus mentors and consulted with former military members. She had sleepless nights and sometimes forgot to eat. Overwhelmed, she withdrew from spring semester classes.

"She did not make a rash decision in the least," said her roommate last year, Demi Marshall, a rising UNC-CH junior. "She knew the consequences and the potential reactions. But she could not hide herself."
Isaacson now needs a fifth year at UNC-CH - and some financial aid - to get her degree. Medical school is still an option, but she’s also become interested in activism. She enjoyed talking to members of Congress about don't ask, don't tell.

Her father, Ken Isaacson, has spent a lot of time brainstorming solutions. Could she get the money back if the federal policy is repealed? Will there be an installment plan for repayment? Could she somehow fulfill her commitment in a civilian role?

So far, no answers.

"It's disappointing that our country doesn't want her," he said. "But she will find some way to make her mark."

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Student Protests Tie Up Campuses in Puerto Rico

By OMAYA SOSA-PASCUAL and EMMA GRAVES FITZSIMMONS

SAN JUAN, P.R. — The seven entry gates on the largest campus of the University of Puerto Rico system remained chained shut on Thursday. Beyond improvised barricades were hundreds of students in makeshift camps, some with portable showers and stoves, hardly engaged in the typical college springtime routine of studying for final exams and preparing for graduation.

The students here have hunkered down, bringing the academic calendar to a halt. They are a month into a strike that has crippled an 11-campus system with more than 62,000 students, intent on persuading the administration to revoke austerity measures that they believe will unfairly hamper low-income students. Only one campus, for medical sciences, is operational.

The Río Piedras campus here in the capital has been closed since the strike began on April 21. When the students locked the gates, a confrontation with the police ensued, and university officials later decided to shut down the school. The territory is grappling with a huge budget deficit and an unemployment rate of 16 percent. The strike is the latest, most contentious protest against Gov. Luis G. Fortuño, a Republican elected in 2008. Thousands of union members rallied against planned layoffs by the government in a national protest last October.

As the university system announced budget cuts, students demanded an alternative and a greater transparency for university finances. One point of tension is funding for music, athletics and honors scholarships for students who also have federal grants.

“We understand this is social marginalization and discrimination against the people with less resources,” said Fernando Espinal, a law school graduate and former president of the student council.

University officials did not respond to requests for interviews.
Many public universities in the United States have faced tuition increases and cuts in funding because of states’ financial problems. In March, thousands of students and faculty members protested at the University of California.

But the strike in Puerto Rico has continued for weeks and grown increasingly tense, with reports of the police preventing the students from receiving supplies, food and water last weekend.

The fiscal crisis set up the conditions for the student strike, said Miguel Soto-Class, executive director of the Center for a New Economy, an independent research organization here.

“The University of Puerto Rico is receiving a significant amount less than it has received in the past,” he said. “It has forced the administration to undertake some cost-cutting measures that have not been popular with the students and some of the staff.”

Mr. Fortuño has encouraged both sides to work together to reach a solution, a spokesman said.

The governor said in an e-mail interview: “It is unfortunate that a minuscule group of students, that do not represent the vast majority of university students, have decided to take matters in their own hands and closed the university gates, thus precluding the vast majority of students to continue their studies, the teachers to impart their classes and the researchers to continue their research projects.”

The protesters spend their time reading and using computers with wireless Internet access to spread the word about the strike. They have received support from union leaders, writers and performers, including the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano and the Puerto Rican musician Ricky Martin, who posted a supportive message on Twitter.

After negotiations between the administration and students fell apart on Thursday, Aura Colón Solá, a member of the university’s law school action committee, said she was prepared to continue the strike for several more months. She said she was upset that university officials had sued some student leaders to try to end the strike.

“You do not sue students if you really intend to negotiate,” she said. “It is ridiculous. They would have to sue the 200 students in here and the thousands that voted in favor of this.”

Maritza Stanchich, an English professor at the Río Piedras campus who supports the strike, said many professors viewed the strike as a “teachable moment” to show the students how to stand up for themselves.
“It has been an enormous disruption,” she said, “but it’s meant to be that way to force the administration to negotiate."

Students said the administration tried to end the strike through a court injunction, but public backlash intensified and Mr. Fortuño revoked the court order after three days. This week, the police chief ordered a reduction of the police presence.

On Thursday, the mood was calm at the main gate, where about 20 police officers stood guard. A large sign on the fence read “You may cut all the flowers, but will never eradicate spring.”