



OPTOMETRIC SCHOLAR of the Month



OPTOMETRIC SCHOLAR OF THE MONTH: DALTON CUNNINGHAM

PLEASE PROVIDE A BRIEF SUMMARY OF YOUR BACKGROUND.

I was raised in the heart of the Cherokee Nation in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, with my younger sister, Cailey, who is a second-year dental school student at the University of Oklahoma. Competitive basketball shaped our backgrounds while we were growing up, and taught us important life lessons. My father is a buyer/sales associate of the family-owned Tahlequah Lumber, and my mother is the IT/QA manager for the Hard Rock Casino in Catoosa, Oklahoma. I obtained my bachelor's degree from Oklahoma State University with a major in biochemistry and molecular biology.

DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT ACADEMIC SITUATION.

I am a third-year student at Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry (NSUOCO). Upon learning I was accepted into NSU, I had a great feeling of pride, realizing the actuality of returning home to become a doctor of optometry. This program is nationally known for its clinical experience, and after 1 full year of clinicals, I am more than satisfied with our classes' clinical diversity. Outside of the classroom, Tahlequah is surrounded by the Illinois River and Lake Tenkiller, which makes home the perfect place for outdoor people like me (if by some miracle there is free time from the books).

WHAT SPARKED YOUR INTEREST IN OPTOMETRY?

A subdural hematoma almost cost me my life at age 11. Without quick action, it's possible I wouldn't be here today. As a kid, I was in awe that someone with no affiliation to me was willing to use their medical knowledge to save my life. I believe experiences like this pushed me to use my mind to help others through medical care such as optometry. As I grew older, I heard about the prestigious NSUOCO. With many prominent optometrists to shadow and learn from, I knew that optometry was my route to providing medical care to my future community. It was also comforting to know that I would be studying, and eventually practicing, in my hometown if it was to all come full circle.

WHAT SPECIALTIES ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT?

Ocular disease and the medical side of optometry. I plan on pursuing a residency that will further my education in both areas so I can give the absolute best care to any patient who walks through my door.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST REWARDING ASPECT OF YOUR TRAINING SO FAR?

It has been, hands down, creating relationships with patients, students, professors, and everyone in between. I grew up informed about this school and what it means to the people of Tahlequah. Now that I am here, it's unbelievable that I am getting the opportunity to treat friends and family who I've known my entire life. I have been honing my optometric skills 5 minutes from the old basketball gym I used to practice in as a child. My situation is truly unique, and it has been nothing short of rewarding.

WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND MOST CHALLENGING IN YOUR OPTOMETRIC JOURNEY?

Honestly, balancing time for school, family, friends, and myself. It's hard knowing that at times I cannot be physically or mentally present for life outside of school; however, it is only temporary, and I have an incredible future ahead.

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF 5 YEARS FROM NOW? WHAT ABOUT 15 YEARS FROM NOW?

I would like to attain a residency in ocular disease, after which I plan to work with the Indian Health Services in a hospital and/or rural eye program. I am keeping location options open, as I would like to experience somewhere new before returning to northeast Oklahoma to raise a family. I see myself working with a Native American tribe or investing in a private practice in northeast Oklahoma. Once I am established with my family, I aspire to become a leader within the Oklahoma Association of Optometric Physicians, where I hope to continue expanding the scope of optometric practice by applying standards that ensure the continuous improvement of our profession for our patients. ■

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- Financial disclosure: None

