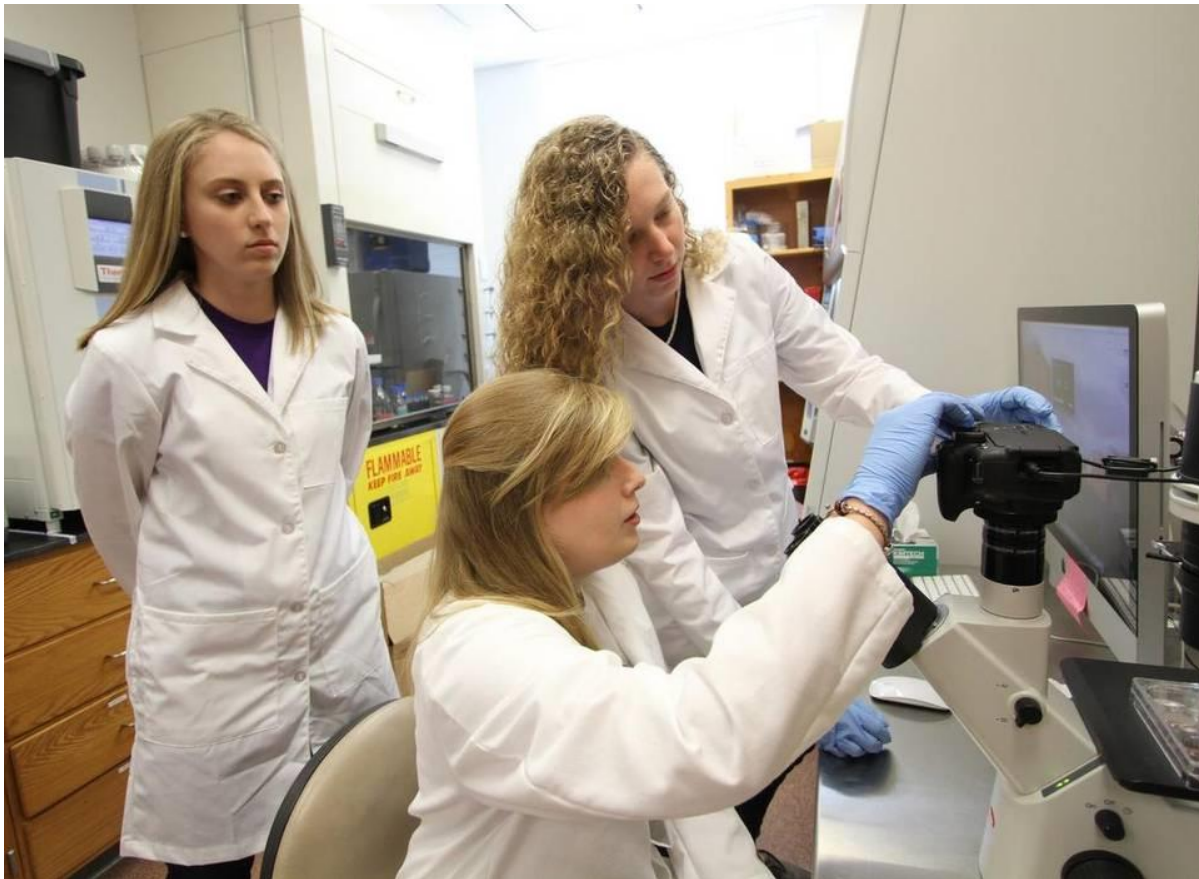


3 Winthrop roommates look to future in medicine, research, therapy

Three Winthrop roommates who studied biology will attend graduate programs in the fall
Their fields: medicine, research and physical therapy

Students said undergraduate research and other opportunities enabled their success



Kristin Ramirez, 21, left, from Waxhaw, N.C., Kathryn Steverson, 22, from Summerville, and Lauren Green, 21, from Myrtle Beach work with a microscope in a biology lab at Winthrop University on Thursday. All three students studied biology at Winthrop and are planning to attend graduate school. **Tracy Kimball** tkimball@heraldonline.com

BY JENNIFER BECKNELL

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ROCK HILL

Kathryn Steverson is on her way to medical school, Kristin Ramirez is off to physical therapy school and Lauren Green plans to earn a doctorate in biology.

The three biology majors, all roommates at the Courtyard at Winthrop during their senior year, were among nearly 700 students who received bachelor's degrees Saturday from Winthrop University.

All three have used their undergraduate experiences as springboards to the future; each was accepted into multiple professional programs. In August, they all plan to pursue graduate degrees at different schools.

They attribute their success in competitive fields in part to the chance to do research and engage in other kinds of hands-on experiences at the Rock Hill school of nearly 6,000 students.

"It's the best roommate experience I have ever had," said Green, 21, of Myrtle Beach, who plans to attend a doctoral program at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. She eventually would like to teach and do research.

Steverson, 22, of Summerville, plans to attend the University of South Carolina School of Medicine, while Ramirez, 21, from Waxhaw, N.C., has decided to attend physical therapy school at the University of Nebraska.

Biology is a challenging field, and applicants to graduate programs face stiff competition, but Green, Steverson and Ramirez said they helped each other along the way. Their fourth roommate, Ashley Ricciardi, studied a related field, human nutrition.

Green said each of the three was rejected from at least one graduate school. They built each other up and mourned together, she said.

All three did some regional travel to places like Atlanta and Asheville, N.C., to present research.

"They are all very hardworking and very supportive of one another," said Matthew Stern, an assistant professor of biology.

"When one person was struggling with a technique, or the results weren't coming in the way they would expect, they would step in and help out each other," he said.

Dwight Dimaculangan, chair of the Winthrop biology department, said all three found opportunities to not only get experience, but also to give back outside the classroom.

“Undergraduate research is a big part of it,” Dimaculangan said. “Those kinds of opportunities are what prepared them really well for getting into those programs.”

Stern said Winthrop “has these really cool opportunities, and it might not be something that you’d expect for a school our size. They all did a really good job in taking advantage of those.”

‘It’s all about cancer’

Dimaculangan said the school has other students who have enjoyed similar success. But he said what is unusual is that the three students were roommates.

“They really do support each other, and they are three of the top-performing students,” Dimaculangan said.

Green, who was attracted to Winthrop in part because of the low student-teacher ratio, said she was accepted in the Winthrop McNair Scholars program.

The McNair program prepares first-generation, low-income and underrepresented undergraduates to be successful in PhD programs by providing research and other opportunities.

Green designed and worked on her own research project that involved using an inhibitor to treat cancer cells. “I want to work with cancer,” she said. “It’s all about cancer for me.”

Part of her interest in cancer is personal, she said. Her father and grandfather were both diagnosed with cancer, and her grandfather died. She also has been involved in the American Cancer Society’s Relay for Life.

Volunteer experience

Steverson, one of four top students honored during Saturday’s events with the President’s Award for Academic Excellence, was also able to do undergraduate research.

She worked with fat tissue stem cells, trying to enhance the potential for them to become more similar to embryonic stem cells, which are important because they can differentiate into other types of cells.

She also earned clinic hours for her medical school application doing a lot of volunteer work. She volunteered at the York County Free Clinic, went on a medical mission to Honduras in July 2014 and volunteered at a California camp for children with chronic illnesses.

The York County clinic “was very hands on, working with women,” Steverson said. “I saw a C-section, and it was just beautiful. I could see myself doing something like that.”

Double major

Ramirez, a dancer for 19 years, said she fell in love with biology during her senior year in high school, but she didn’t want to give up dance, either.

“I wanted to study it at the college level,” she said.

So she earned a degree in dance in addition to her biology degree. She was in both the McNair and Eagle STEM scholar programs; the STEM program targets students seeking to move on to graduate programs in science.

The double major, which she completed in four years, was not an easy feat, Ramirez said. “It definitely tested my dedication for four years,” she said.

Ramirez said for her honors thesis, she studied the Achilles tendons of male and female mice to compare the strength and fitness and to see if males were more prone to Achilles tendon rupture. She found no statistical difference.

She also served as president of a community service organization, Gamma Beta Phi, and participated in events like Special Olympics, CROP walk and the Wounded Warrior project.

Green, Steverson and Ramirez will be scattered far apart when they begin graduate work in the fall, but the three expect they will continue to stay in touch.

“Our relationship will be the same, it will just be electronic rather than being in person,” Green said. “We will continue to keep up with each other.”

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