

SUMMER 2025

Quillen

Magazine

IN THIS ISSUE:

**A Perfect Couples
Match**

**Quillen Students
Lead in Primary Care**

**Quillen Alumna
Shines After
Hurricane Helene**

**Celebrating
Dr. Tom Kwasigroch
& Doug Taylor**



NATIONALLY RANKED. LOCALLY ROOTED.

Quillen Magazine

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QUILLEN
COLLEGE of MEDICINE
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MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

When I look back on the past year at the Quillen College of Medicine, I am nothing short of amazed and impressed by the accomplishments and impact of our students, resident physicians, faculty, and staff.

Since 1974, this college has remained steadfast in its commitment to improving the health and well-being of those in rural and underserved communities. More than 50 years later, that commitment is consistently recognized in our graduate outcomes, match day statistics, and the *U.S. News & World Report's* annual medical school rankings.

This year, the Quillen College of Medicine ranked *second* in the nation for the number of its graduates practicing in medically underserved areas. Quillen was also designated a “Tier 1” school in the “Best Medical Schools: Primary Care” ranking – placing us among the top 16 in the nation.

Such recognition is an accomplishment we can all be proud of, not for the rankings themselves, but for what they speak to.

What these rankings say is that our commitment to rural and underserved communities is having an incredible impact – that our graduates, who care so deeply for the people in these communities, are making a tangible difference in such a critical sector of health care.

Perhaps nothing better illustrates that impact and commitment to service than the events that transpired in the hours, days, and weeks

after Hurricane Helene devastated parts of our region.

In some way, nearly every person at this college was affected by the disaster. And yet, our Quillen family jumped into action almost immediately to support those affected, whether it was family, friends, or the patients cared for by ETSU Health.

Yes, the past year certainly had some difficult moments, but our community at Quillen left me nothing short of amazed and impressed.

In this issue of *Quillen Magazine*, you will read more about our response to support the region following Hurricane Helene, incredible accomplishments, ground-breaking research endeavors, and much more.

Each year, this space provides me an opportunity to brag about the incredible work happening all across the Quillen College of Medicine, and it serves as a reminder of how proud I am to be a graduate of Quillen and to serve as dean. Thank you for all you do to help this college continue to impact the lives of others, in this region and beyond.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "William A. Block Jr. MD". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping line extending from the end.

Dr. William A. Block Jr.
Vice President for Clinical Affairs
Dean, Quillen College of Medicine

Quillen Family Rallies to Support Community After Hurricane Helene



In the face of unimaginable storm damage, the Quillen family did not waver. They went to work.

Across Northeast Tennessee, Southwest Virginia, and Western North Carolina, people's homes were destroyed and lives lost or uprooted by Hurricane Helene's torrential downpours on September 27, 2024.

Many area clinics had to close their doors. Several hospitals were under reduced services, and in Erwin, the hospital closed altogether following devastating flooding.

Quillen College of Medicine made the decision to keep the doors open at its 16 ETSU Health community clinics, providing alternatives to overcrowded and overwhelmed hospitals.

Inside those hospitals, Quillen faculty and residents worked alongside health care partners to care for their community in a moment of crisis.

Meanwhile, multiple ETSU Health clinics immediately began collecting necessary supplies including water, food, hygiene kits, clothing and cleaning supplies to create

flood buckets.

In the immediate aftermath of the storm, 13 physicians with ETSU Health Family Medicine Johnson City performed home visits across four counties to conduct welfare checks and deliver supplies.

"As primary care physicians at ETSU Health, we have the honor of really getting to know our patients well," said Dr. Christian Timmis. "So, getting word that patients you know are not reachable, and that they and their loved ones are potentially in harm's way is the motivating factor for us."



The clinic contacted nearly 500 patients in high-risk areas to assess their needs.

Thanks to an interprofessional team effort organized by Dr. McKenzie Highsmith, an Associate Professor and Director of Family Medicine Pharmacy at ETSU Gatton College of Pharmacy, physicians traveled to communities in Washington, Greene, Carter and Unicoi counties to assist patients who identified needs or who the clinic was unable to contact.

“We had an overwhelming response from our whole family to live out our vision to take great care of our patients and community,” said Dr. Jason Moore, Chair of ETSU Quillen College of Medicine’s Family Medicine Department.

“Our whole interprofessional team pulled together: from the front office sorting out patients by location, to nursing gathering donations, to the pharmacy team coordinating the efforts, to medical students volunteering to make phone calls, to residents and faculty giving up their wellness time to do home visits,” he said. “It was truly amazing how quickly things came together with a common vision to serve. We had numerous patients in tears, thanking us for what we did.”

In addition to their direct outreach immediately following the storm, Family Medicine Johnson City physicians continued support in areas impacted, including staffing a pop-up clinic in Elk Mills.

“It was truly amazing how quickly things came together with a common vision to serve. We had numerous patients in tears, thanking us for what we did.”

–Dr. Jason Moore

Among other inspirational efforts, volunteer groups of students, faculty and staff supplied and served at donation centers and places of critical need throughout the region.

In a student-led effort, Quillen faculty, staff and students donated \$3,300 worth of supplies



to Piere’s Marketplace, which partnered with Second Harvest Food Bank to assist Unicoi, Carter, Washington, Greene and Johnson counties with relief efforts.

At the Institute for Integrated Behavioral Health (IIBH), faculty and staff moved to quickly find ways to support survivors and mental health care providers, hosting a specially called webinar to assist providers in how to provide mental health care to those affected by the storm.

“It’s a lot of health care education efforts, which definitely feels like it’s in our lane,” Dr. Jodi Polaha, Director of the Institute for Integrated Behavioral Health, said of their work after the storm. “We’re just helping our

health care providers be more knowledgeable and responsive and know when to leverage their in-house mental health providers.”

The IIBH also worked to support providers themselves, many of whom struggled with fatigue, sadness, survivors’ guilt

and other symptoms commonly seen in response to a community disaster.

Through every challenge brought by Hurricane Helene, the Quillen family demonstrated an unwavering commitment to their mission: to serve, support and care for those in need.

News Briefs



Quillen's Beaumont Studying Treatment for Heart Failure

Dr. Eric Beaumont, a Professor in the Quillen College of Medicine's Department of Biomedical Sciences, is studying a potential treatment for heart failure by stimulating the vagus nerve – a key part of the nervous system that controls involuntary functions such as heart rate and blood pressure.

The \$2.7 million grant is funded by the National Institutes of Health's National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

The project will further study preliminary evidence that suggests signals from a specific part of the hypothalamus – the paraventricular nucleus – could serve as a treatment for heart failure. Thus far, large patient trials of vagal nerve stimulation to treat heart failure have failed despite preclinical evidence of success.

"Success will be to cure heart failure," Beaumont said of his research.

ETSU Health Honors Three 'Health Care Heroes'

Three ETSU Health physicians received high honors during The Business Journal of Tri-Cities TN/VA's 2024 Healthcare Heroes Awards Ceremony in August 2024.

Dr. Karen Schetzina received the "Cup of Kindness Innovation Award," while Drs. Josh Henry and Blair Reece received "Health Care Hero" awards. Each year, the Business Journal honors individuals and organizations that "go above and beyond the call of duty in the provision of healthcare in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia."



From left, Drs. Karen Schetzina, Josh Henry and Blair Reece

ETSU Researcher Studying Macular Degeneration

East Tennessee State University's Dr. Mark Kleinman has received a \$2.6 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to study macular degeneration – the leading cause of permanent vision loss worldwide.

Kleinman, a vitreoretinal specialist and professor in the Quillen College of Medicine, will study how certain proteins – called histones – regulate the retinal pigment epithelium (RPE), a layer of cells in the eye that allow people to see clearly. His research, titled "Histone Expression

in the Aging RPE," is funded through the NIH's National Eye Institute.

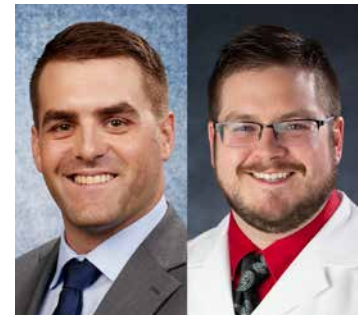
"The knowledge we will obtain through this scientific investigation will identify critical targets to maintain retinal health in aging that may be applied to other age-related diseases as well," said Kleinman. "It is my hope that these efforts will significantly impact the future of aging biology, therapeutics and achieving a healthy lifespan for our aging population."

Prestigious 40 Under Forty Honorees

Quillen's Jake Berens and Dr. T. Brad Wood earned the prestigious 40 under Forty achievement in 2025.

Jake Berens is a first-year medical student who served almost 12 years of active duty in the United States Marine Corps. As an ETSU undergraduate he served as president of the ETSU Student Veterans of America Chapter, organizing numerous events to help local veterans while building camaraderie among the campus veteran population.

Dr. Wood is the clerkship director for medical students and associate program director for the OB/GYN Residency Program at the College of Medicine. He works in the ETSU Health OB/GYN clinic in Johnson City and at several community-based hospitals, serving his patients, delivering children and performing surgeries.



From left, Jake Berens and Dr. Brad Wood

Quillen Alum honored with ETSU Award



The ETSU Alumni Association recognized Dr. Sean Ochsenbein as the PRIDE of ETSU Award recipient. He is a board-certified emergency medicine physician in Johnson City and one of the chief medical officers for Ballad Health.

When Ochsenbein began his ETSU medical journey, he was elected class president, serving on multiple national boards, including the Emergency Medicine Residents Association and the Gold Humanism Honor Society. He received the Unsung Hero Award for a heroic rescue as a medical student.

After completing an emergency medicine residency at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, he served on multiple rescue teams at the Putnam County Rescue Squad. In 2018, he was awarded the Public Safety Medal of Valor for saving lives. Recently, Ochsenbein was recognized for his leadership during the rescue of individuals from the roof of Unicoi County Hospital during the flooding caused by Hurricane Helene.



ETSU's Quillen College of Medicine Ranks No. 2 in Nation for Underserved Care

East Tennessee State University's Quillen College of Medicine earned high marks in U.S. News & World Report's 2025 Best Medical School Rankings – particularly in primary care and impact in rural and underserved communities.

Since its founding more than a half-century ago, the college has been committed to the betterment of health care in this region and beyond. And each year – fittingly, not long after the college's Match Day ceremony, where soon-to-be graduates learn where they will

head for residency – that commitment is reflected in the U.S. News & World Report’s annual best medical school rankings.

2025 is no different.

In U.S. News & World Report’s ranking of schools with the “Most Graduates Practicing in Medically Underserved Areas,” the Quillen College of Medicine ranked second in the nation. The Quillen College of Medicine was also designated a “Tier 1” school in the “2025 Best Medical Schools: Primary Care” ranking – placing it inside the top 16 in the nation.

Both rankings were the best among colleges in Tennessee.

This national recognition is a direct reflection of Quillen’s commitment to serving the Appalachian region and underscores why ETSU is the flagship institution of Appalachia — a university deeply rooted in its mission to uplift rural communities through education, health care and service.

“I am always proud to see our commitment to serving our rural and underserved populations recognized,” said Dr. Bill Block, Dean of the college and ETSU Vice President for Clinical Affairs. “What makes these rankings so special is that they go beyond speaking of what the



college has done and instead speak to the outsized impact our graduates have on the communities they call home after their time at Quillen – with many practicing in our region.”

Quillen has increased opportunities and pathways for admission for students hailing from rural areas, a true testament to the college’s commitment to serving the underserved.

A hallmark of this commitment is the college’s EQUIP program, designed to identify and mentor students from rural and underserved areas interested in attending Quillen. EQUIP is an acronym for Expanding Quillen to the Underserved through an Integrated Program.

Additionally, the college hosts annual summer camps that are free of charge for students from rural areas to foster an interest in medicine through hands-on learning experiences, lectures and admissions guidance.

Quillen is also home to a Rural Primary Care Tract, a specially designed experience embedded within the overall four-year curriculum for students interested in practicing primary care in rural or underserved areas. It provides opportunities with a small cohort of students to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to



practice in communities with limited resources and increased health care disparities.

Each year, this program has approximately 15 participants and has been a staple at the college for more than 30 years.

“The Quillen College of Medicine is very intentional in mentoring students from these communities, who many times elect to return to those very underserved communities — or communities like it — to practice”

—Dr. Thomas Kincer

Dr. Thomas Kincer, Quillen’s Associate Dean for Rural and Community Programs, said more often than not, the students who participate in the Rural Primary Care Tract are from rural areas and desire to return to those areas to practice.

Training physicians to serve and excel in rural and underserved areas starts in those very communities — by inspiring the students from there to pursue a career in medicine,” said Kincer. “At Quillen, we have several programs

to introduce them to careers in medicine, including summer camps that are free for students hailing from rural and underserved areas, EQUIP, and the Rural Primary Care Tract.

“The Quillen College of Medicine is very intentional in mentoring students from these communities, who many times elect to return to those very underserved communities — or communities like it — to practice,” he continued.

The U.S. News & World Report rankings also spoke to the commitment to serving in rural areas and

in primary care – ranking inside the top 50 nationally for “Most Graduates Practicing in Rural Areas” and “Most Graduates Practicing in Primary Care.”

“For more than 100 years, East Tennessee State University has been guided by its mission to improve the lives of people in this region and beyond,” said ETSU’s Dr. Kimberly D. McCorkle, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs. “The Quillen College of Medicine is a shining example of that mission.”



To view the full U.S. News and World Report “2025 Best Medical Schools” rankings, visit <https://bit.ly/4lnZnyc> or scan the QR code:





Quillen College of Medicine Students Celebrate Match Day

Surrounded by their classmates and loved ones, the Class of 2025 at East Tennessee State University's Quillen College of Medicine learned where they will spend their residencies in March – tearing open envelopes revealing their matches while shouts of joy erupted across the room.

Overall, the members of the Class of 2025 will travel across 24 states. Thirteen students will complete their residencies with ETSU Health, among the 25 who will stay in Tennessee.

In total, 36 will remain in either Tennessee, North Carolina, or Virginia – 48% of the class. Five students matched into advanced programs they will attend after an initial required year of training in dermatology, ophthalmology, radiology and radiation oncology.

Three students will complete their residencies through military service.

“Match Day is always a special day in a medical student’s journey to becoming a physician, and for us as educators, it is so rewarding to see our soon-to-be graduates celebrating this incredible milestone with their friends



and families,” said Dr. Bill Block, Dean of the Quillen College of Medicine and Vice President of Clinical Affairs.

The Quillen College of Medicine has long been recognized for the number of graduates it sends to work in primary care. The Class of 2025 is no different, with 34 entering family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, or obstetrics and gynecology.

This reflects ETSU’s deep commitment to serving Appalachia, where access to quality health care is critical. As the flagship institution of Appalachia, ETSU continues to lead efforts to strengthen the region’s health care workforce, ensuring that communities, especially those in rural and underserved areas, have access to dedicated, well-trained physicians.

In total, graduates matched into 16 specialties.

“As our Class of 2025 prepares for the next chapter in their journey, we look forward to seeing the impact they will have in their careers as part of a rich legacy of physicians who received their education at the Quillen College of Medicine,” said Block.



A Perfect Couples Match: One Shared Goal



From the moment Summer Shore Bethurum and A.J. Bethurum met, they never stopped pursuing their dreams — walking side by side through undergraduate studies, medical school and marriage. Now, thanks to a highly successful couples match, they are advancing together into their residencies as physicians.

Their shared dream began to take shape when they both applied and interviewed at East Tennessee State University's Quillen College of Medicine. Today, they are members of the recently graduated Class of 2025.

"We met in our genetics class during sophomore year at the University of Tennessee," A.J. recalled. "We started studying together, scheduled all of our classes for the next semester, and have been by each other's side ever since."

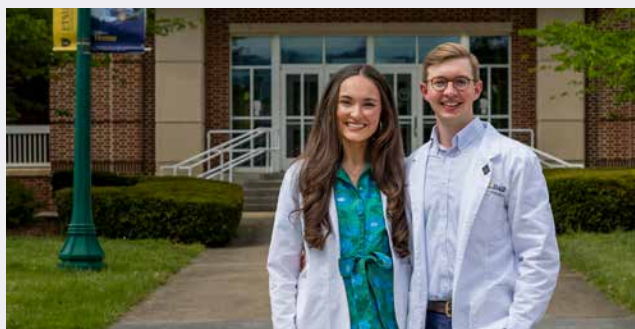
As Tennessee natives, the couple knew they

wanted to continue their medical education in a place that offered not only an excellent academic environment but also a strong sense of community that they would hope to call home.

For Summer, that place revealed itself early. Before her senior year of college, she participated in the Medical Horizons Program at Quillen, a four-week summer program that gives pre-medical students hands-on exposure and first-hand experience in medicine.

"I appreciated the encouraging and welcoming learning environment," Summer said. "The kindness of the attendings, residents, and medical students made my decision to attend Quillen an easy one."

"What I love most about Quillen is the Quillen family," Summer added. "The way our faculty



mentors have relentlessly supported the pursuit of our clinical and personal goals has made all the difference.”

“I wanted to go to school in a place where I could wholly focus on my education without external societal stressors,” A.J. said. “I knew after visiting Johnson City that the small-town feel, kindness in the community, excellent cost of living, and proximity to mountains would provide this.”

Family and early hands-on experiences inspired them to become physicians.

A.J. was inspired by his father, a beloved physician in their hometown.

“There are a million reasons why I chose medicine — and general surgery specifically — but seeing the deep impact my father had on his patients made me want to do the same,” he said. “Growing up, we were always running into his patients around town, and it was clear just how meaningful his work was in the community.”

As the first in her family to pursue a career in medicine, Summer has always felt called to become an OB/GYN physician.

“I have developed a profound appreciation for the opportunities that await me in OB/GYN — to care for the entire breadth of the human experience — welcoming new lives, honoring patients in death, and empowering both the mundane and the monumental moments in between,” she said. “Since gaining experience in the field and deciding this truly is the career for me, I have shared in patients’ and families’ highest and lowest moments.”

During their time at Quillen, Summer and A.J. got married and knew they wanted to continue their medical journey together into residency.

They both knew that the couples match was the next goal.

The couples match is a process within the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) that allows two medical students in a committed relationship to coordinate their residency placements. While it does not guarantee a match together, it increases the likelihood that both medical students can pursue their medical training without being separated.

As they prepared their applications, both reflected on how Quillen has shaped them into the aspiring physicians that they are today.

“The experience during my clinical years

“The kindness of the attendings, residents, and medical students made my decision to attend Quillen an easy one.”

—Dr. Summer Shore Bethurum

prepared me to enter residency with a strong foundation,” said A.J.

“Quillen gave me opportunities to grow not only as a student, but as a teacher, researcher, and servant leader,” Summer said. “That foundation made me a strong residency applicant.”

On Friday, March 21, 2025, surrounded by classmates and loved ones, the Bethurums opened their Match Day envelopes to discover they had successfully couples matched — both earning spots at their top pick, Vanderbilt University’s OB/GYN and general surgery residency programs.

“We couldn’t be more excited to be heading to Vanderbilt for residency,” AJ said.

What began as a childhood dream, nurtured in a college classroom and strengthened through years of dedication and mutual support, is now continuing in residency. And through it all, they’ve never stopped walking side by side.



Quillen Celebrates Class of 2025

Seventy-two members of East Tennessee State University's Quillen College of Medicine celebrated commencement on Friday, May 9, closing a milestone chapter in their journey to become physicians before they head off for residency placements across the country this summer.

Overall, members of the Class of 2025 will head off to residency programs in 24 states, with 25 remaining in Tennessee. Of those staying in the Volunteer State, 13 will complete their residency with ETSU Health.

Roughly half of the class will remain in Tennessee, North Carolina or Virginia. The Class of 2025 also reflects the college's commitment to primary care, with about half entering primary care-related specialties.

"Commencement is one of the most memorable days on our calendar, and today was no exception," said Dr. Bill Block, Dean of the Quillen College of Medicine and ETSU Vice President for Clinical Affairs. "Though we will miss our students, it is always an exciting moment to see them cross the stage, knowing they will be outstanding physicians wherever they are headed."

Dr. Jenn Whittington was the guest speaker. A Virginia native and four-year ETSU track and field team member, Whittington received her undergraduate degree from ETSU and graduated from Quillen. She completed her general surgery

residency at the University of Kentucky and her complex general surgical oncology fellowship at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.

Brennan McNeil of Nashville was the class speaker. McNeil will complete his residency in internal medicine at Ascension Saint Thomas Hospital Midtown in Nashville.





Quillen Students Lead in Primary Care

By adulthood, most everyone has seen a physician who left them feeling dismissed. Unseen. Unheard.

“Quillen doctors don’t do that. Quillen believes in training us to treat people holistically,” said third-year medical student Connor Belcher. “Quillen meets people where they are, not where we as physicians think they should be. Quillen also treats them like family as well.”

Belcher and fellow third-year student Allison Franklin share a passion for primary care. Both plan a future in family medicine. Both chose Quillen because they wanted a program that would train them for service.

“I chose Quillen because I wanted a program that not only prioritized excellent medical

education but also emphasized the importance of building strong, meaningful relationships with patients,” Franklin said. “Over the past two years, I’ve grown tremendously in my communication, leadership, and interprofessional skills. These experiences have shaped me into someone who strives to be both a trusted resource for patients and a confident leader within the health care team.”

Those very leadership skills have captured national attention. Belcher and Franklin were among only 30 medical students and residents nationwide to receive scholarships for the Family Medicine Leads Emerging Leader Institute, a prestigious, year-long program hosted by the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP).

Dr. Reid Blackwelder, Associate Dean for Graduate Medical and Continuing Education, professor of Family Medicine, and Past President of AAFP, nominated the students. He noted Franklin’s selection as student liaison to the AAFP Commission on Membership and Member Services in 2024.

“She is already a student leader at this national level,” he wrote. “She brings experience, passion, research experience, and leadership ability to this next potential role.”

In Belcher’s nomination letter, Dr. Blackwelder noted his commitment to the essence of Quillen’s mission, regularly initiating conversations about family medicine, advocacy and changing the world for the better.

“I have seen him grow in confidence and skill, and he is poised to be not only a leader here at Quillen, but also within family medicine,” Blackwelder concluded.

To be selected, Belcher and Franklin had to demonstrate commitment to family medicine as a specialty and commit to a project in one of three tracks: Policy and Public Health Leadership, Personal and Practice Leadership, or Philanthropic and Mission-driven Leadership.





Dr. Salvatore Paolillo



Dr. Corey Iqbal

Fellowship-Trained Surgeons' Unique Skills Improve Access to Specialized Care

For the parents of a child born with a sunken chest or a woman facing chronic pain or the loss of her fertility, ETSU Health's newest surgeons' skills bring fresh hope to the region.

Families will benefit from easier access to advanced surgical care thanks to two new Quillen College of Medicine faculty members.

Dr. Corey Iqbal joined ETSU Health Surgery full time in June, leading ETSU Health's team of pediatric surgeons. Dr. Salvatore Paolillo joined ETSU Health OB/GYN in October. Both bring fellowship training and specializations that provide the region access to unique specialty care.

Five years ago, only one pediatric surgeon served the region east of Knoxville. But thanks to investments by ETSU Health in partnership with Ballad Health and the Niswonger Children's Hospital, Iqbal now rounds out a team of five pediatric surgeons. He joins Dr. Brad Feltis, chair of Quillen's Department of Surgery; Dr. Lesli Taylor; Dr. Michael Allshouse; and Dr. Andrew Trecartin, who joined in 2024.

Iqbal has 15 years of pediatric surgery experience and a passion for expanding access to quality care. He offers patients access to office-based procedures whenever possible, which lowers costs and is often more comfortable for young patients than surgery in a hospital setting.

His unique training in treating a condition where the breastbone sinks into the chest, known as pectus excavatum, or sunken chest, quickly garnered attention within the community.

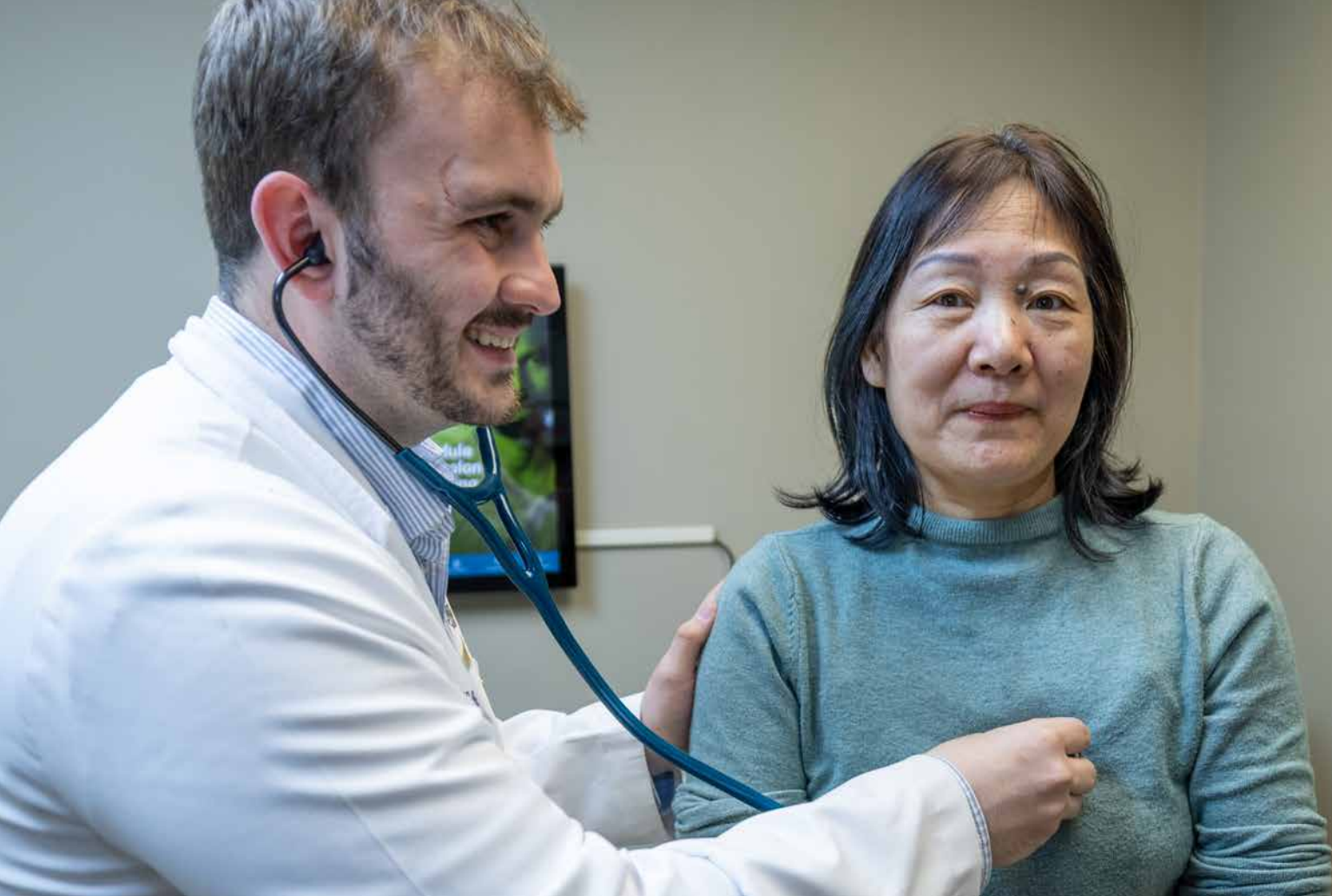
"Our surgeons are all very involved in every patient's care," Iqbal said. "We're committed to providing timely access to surgical care for the entire region, including Northeast Tennessee, Western North Carolina, and Southwest Virginia."

Like Iqbal and his unique training in chest wall reconstruction, Paolillo brings to the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology the training and skills to help women within the region retain their fertility, where more common procedures would result in infertility.

Fellowship-trained in minimally invasive gynecologic surgery, Paolillo provides surgical treatment for conditions such as endometriosis, chronic pelvic pain, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), cysts, fibroids, uterine polyps, scar tissue and fertility-reducing conditions.

"I enjoy getting to know my patients and being their partner in figuring out the most appropriate level of care to meet their needs," Paolillo said. "I will take the time to understand their concerns. I listen carefully and don't stop until they get results. I would like them to know they are validated in their symptoms and life experience, and I am here to help."

The additions of Paolillo and Iqbal to ETSU Health's lineup of specialized care and Quillen's impressive faculty reflect the college's commitment to meeting the medical needs of underserved communities. This year, Quillen received national attention, ranking No. 2 in the nation for the number of graduates who practice in underserved areas.



Future Physicians Leave Rural Impact

Accessing health care in rural areas poses significant challenges due to limited medical facilities, a shortage of medical professionals and long travel distances. These barriers often contribute to delayed care, which can negatively affect the overall health and well-being of rural communities.

In response, East Tennessee State University's Quillen College of Medicine and ETSU Health, in partnership with the Health Wagon, work together to deliver essential health care services to individuals and families. The Health Wagon aims to provide medically underserved people in Appalachia with quality health care.

On March 13-14, 2025, ETSU Health Family Medicine physician Dr. John Culp, Rural and Community Programs Associate Dean Dr. Tom Kincer, and ETSU Family Medicine residents guided medical students in offering free health screenings and services to individuals in the

towns of Wise and Clintwood in Southwest Virginia.

"The partnership with Quillen College of Medicine and ETSU Health has greatly benefited our community," said Dr. Teresa Tyson, CEO and President of the Health Wagon.



Lisa Chestnut of Big Stone Gap

Lisa Chestnut, a native of Big Stone Gap in Virginia, spoke about the importance of having free health fairs in her community.

“I would not have any kind of health care because I am indigent,” Chestnut said. “Most of our area is below the poverty level.”

Quillen’s Rural and Community Programs give medical students increased exposure to underserved communities. As part of the initiative, third-year medical students are offered choices in a primary care specialty and are placed in rural clinics that align with their chosen field.

“Health care like this is really important in

a rural area like Wise, Virginia, because for many of these patients, this might be the only physician they’ll see all year,” said Jacob Ricketts, now a third-year medical student. “It’s vital that we come out here and make a good impression on them, so they are not afraid to return when they really need help.”

The health fair marked the 37th anniversary of the long-standing partnership between the Health Wagon and Quillen College of Medicine. Over the course of the two-day event, a record 152 patients were served, with the estimated value of care provided totaling nearly \$143,000.



From left, third-year medical students Ana Moreno-Allen “Lexi”, Eric Olson and Jacob Ricketts join Dr. Morgan Levenhagen, a resident at ETSU Health Family Medicine Bristol, during March’s community health fair in partnership with Health Wagon.

Quillen Launches Direct Admissions Pathway for Veterans



East Tennessee State University's Quillen College of Medicine, often boasting one of the nation's largest populations of veteran students among medical schools, is launching a new partnership to provide veterans with more opportunities to attend medical school in Northeast Tennessee.

Through a unique admissions pathway with Special Operations Forces to School of Medicine (SOFToSOM), the Quillen College of Medicine will guarantee interviews to qualifying candidates and provide direct admission to up to three candidates per cycle who meet set qualifications.

The Quillen College of Medicine is the only M.D. program in the nation with a direct admissions pathway with SOFToSOM. It will begin with the Class of 2029 application cycle.

In the last five years, Quillen has enrolled 29 veterans and graduated more than 150 since it was established more than half a century ago.

"We are incredibly proud of Quillen College of Medicine's long track record of supporting our veteran students," said Dr. Bill Block, Dean and Vice President for Clinical Affairs at ETSU. "Being close to the Mountain Home VA hospital offers an ever-present reminder of our commitment to support those who serve our nation."

SOFToSOM started as a group of service members connecting through social media to assist each other in their journey to medical school. In 2023, they officially founded SOFToSOM as the first nonprofit dedicated to helping special forces operators pursue medicine.

ETSU has been recognized as a Military Friendly® school for 15 consecutive years. In April 2025, ETSU earned Gold status in the 2025-26 Military Friendly® School rankings, becoming one of just 32 large public institutions to receive the Gold-level designation. Schools are awarded through a rigorous evaluation of public data, student feedback and institutional programs.

Quillen Promotes Four Graduates into Military

East Tennessee State University's Quillen College of Medicine promoted four graduates from its Class of 2025 into the military – with the ceremony taking place just hours before their official commencement ceremony on May 9.



From left: Doug Taylor, Dr. Creighton Kellum, Dr. Andrew Lithen, Dr. Meredith Frost, Dr. Wenjian Tian, Colonel Dan Bishop, and Dr. Bill Block, pose together during the 2025 Military Promotion and Recognition Ceremony at ETSU Quillen College of Medicine.

Among those promoted are:

- Dr. Meredith Valentine Frost, Captain, U.S. Army. Frost will complete residency at Eisenhower Army Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia.
- Dr. Wenjian Tian, Captain, U.S. Army. Tian will complete residency at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.
- Dr. Andrew Robert Lithen, Lieutenant, U.S. Navy. Lithen will complete residency at the Naval Medical Center in Portsmouth, Virginia, and the Naval Aerospace Medical Institute in Pensacola, Florida.
- Dr. Creighton Lloyd Kellum, Captain, U.S. Air Force. Kellum will complete residency at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, New Hampshire.

Malachi Weaver, Captain, U.S. Navy, was not at the ceremony but is also being promoted into the military. Weaver will complete residency at Marshall Community Health in Huntington, West Virginia.

Tian (Army), Lithen (Navy), and Weaver (Navy) are veterans, and will be returning to the service.

“It is always an incredible honor to celebrate the brave men and women who graduate from the Quillen College of Medicine and choose to serve their country,” said Dr. Bill Block, Dean of the Quillen College of Medicine and ETSU Vice President for Clinical Affairs. “Our commitment to serving our veterans and military-affiliated students is not something we take lightly, and each year this ceremony serves as a welcome reminder of the importance of that mission.”



Quillen Alumna Dr. Jennifer Sauceman Shines Amid Hurricane Helene's Devastation

When Hurricane Helene struck Newport, Tennessee, on September 27, 2024, it unleashed unprecedented devastation.

Floodwaters surged, bridges closed, and homes were lost. In the midst of this chaos, Dr. Jennifer Sauceman, a 2009 Quillen College of Medicine graduate, emerged as a beacon of resilience, leading her pediatric practice to serve a community in crisis.

Sauceman, a Newport native, was no stranger to the Pigeon River's occasional rise. But Helene was different.

"It had just rained and rained," she recalls. "Then Thursday night into Friday morning, it came so fast."

As propane tanks crashed against bridges



Dr. Jennifer Sauceman

and downtown Newport flooded, she faced a personal challenge: evacuating her home with only 15 minutes' notice due to fears of a dam failure. Grabbing her cat and a few belongings, she drove to safety, unable to return for two days.

Yet, her focus quickly shifted to her community.

As a pediatrician at a practice she grew up attending, founded by her own childhood physician, Sauceman felt a deep responsibility.

"We're all in it together," she says.

Her team acted swiftly. By Saturday, they were gutting the home of a staff member who lost everything, salvaging what they could. By Monday, theirs was the only practice in Newport open, despite no running water or safe drinking water.

"We crowdsourced a port-a-potty and a water tank," she explains, laughing at the unexpected skills they marshaled.

The practice became a hub for more than medical care. Partnering with a disaster relief group, they secured a shower wagon, offering 30-minute slots to anyone in need.

"You don't realize how much you need a shower until you can't take one," Sauceman said.



Dr. Erin Jackson, a Quillen graduate and good friend of Dr. Jennifer Sauceman, poses beside donations.



“Quillen prepared me for rural practice, but it’s more than that. It’s about being part of the community.”

–Dr. Jennifer Sauceman

Community members, despite their own losses, showed up with baby food, water and toys for children who lost everything, including one young patient who mourned her “babies”—her toy dolls swept away by the flood.

Sauceman credits Quillen for fostering her service-oriented mindset.

“Quillen prepared me for rural practice, but it’s more than that. It’s about being part of the community,” she says.

Her training, from Appalachian outreach to hands-on patient interaction, equipped her to navigate this crisis with empathy and action. Classmates, including her best friend from Quillen, rallied to deliver diapers, formula and support, reinforcing the tight-knit network Quillen cultivates.

Six months later, the scars remain.

Sauceman notes an uptick in pediatric anxiety triggered by rain, a new challenge she

addresses with care. Reflecting on her journey, she says, “Quillen’s motto for my class was ‘good times and great people.’ That’s what it was, and it’s what I carry forward.”

For Sauceman, serving Newport isn’t just a job — it’s a calling, rooted in her Quillen experience and her love for her hometown.

Support for the Newport region is still needed. To lend a helping hand, please visit cockecountyltrg.org/ to strengthen and uplift the Cocke County Long Term Recovery Group.



A group of volunteers from Newport Pediatrics gathers at a petting zoo well child round up event hosted only two weeks after the flood.

ETSU Health and Ballad Health Expand Partnership to Enhance Training for Cardiologists, Ensure Access to Advanced Cardiac Care

ETSU Health and Ballad Health announced in March an enhanced partnership in cardiology services designed to enhance training for medical students and future cardiologists while also ensuring access to the most advanced cardiac care for the region.

Led by Ballad Health CVA Heart Institute, Ballad Health is welcoming ETSU Health's adult cardiology specialists to the CVA Heart Institute. ETSU Health Pediatric Cardiology will continue practicing in the current location at ETSU Health's clinic in Johnson City.

This partnership gives ETSU Health's faculty providers the opportunity to continue overseeing their patients' care with expertise, while allowing medical students, resident physicians and fellows in East Tennessee

State University's Quillen College of Medicine programs the opportunity to learn and practice within a robust heart institute setting.

"This transition gives physicians participating in Quillen College of Medicine's cardiology fellowship program the opportunity to train under a wide variety of specialists who are providing the full spectrum of cardiological care at the region's premier heart institute," said Dr. Vijay Ramu, ETSU's Cardiology Fellowship Program Director. "Similarly, it will broaden and strengthen the experiences for our resident physicians and medical students, further enhancing the training for the next generation of providers."

ETSU's cardiology program is a three-year, fully accredited program with a total of nine fellowship positions. This specialized training occurs after physicians have already graduated from medical school and completed a three-year residency program, during which they train under an experienced physician.

ETSU Health's cardiologists will continue to serve as faculty at ETSU's Quillen College of Medicine, paving the way for increased access to quality health care for our region.

"Through this effort, we are strengthening our commitment to bringing exceptional care to underserved regions. We've seen many times that community collaboration can strengthen the health and well-being of our community," said Dr. Bill Block, ETSU Health's Chief Executive Officer and Dean of the Quillen College of Medicine. "The region's trauma network, Niswonger Children's Hospital, and Highlands Sports Medicine are all powered by ETSU Health through partnerships with Ballad Health. All have seen phenomenal gains for our community's health and safety, and we are excited to see what this new collaboration will bring."



Student Awards



Dr. Creighton Kellum received the Dean's Distinguished Student Honor Award and the Phillip J. Hinton M.D. Career in Surgery Award.



Dr. Myron Sailors received the Leonard Tow Humanism Award.



Dr. Laken Bevins O'Quinn received the H. Cowan Moss Family Medicine Award and the Glasgow-Rubin Achievement Award.



Dr. Summer Shore Bethurum received the Ann Trantum Hawkins Award for Excellence in Women's Health, the Dillard M. Sholes Society Award, and the Glasgow-Rubin Achievement Award.



Dr. Zachary Carter and **Dr. Blanton Gillespie** received the Ronald S. McCord M.D. Rural Family Medicine Award.



Dr. Margaret Dean received the Ann Trantum Hawkins Award for Excellence in Women's Health, the Glasgow-Rubin Achievement Award, and the Outstanding Performance Junior Surgical Clerkship Award.



Dr. Lillian DeSousa and **Dr. Gia Hodges** received the Merck Manual Award for Academic Excellence.



Dr. William Dean received the Excellence in Emergency Medicine Award.



Dr. Kirsten Dodson received the Dr. Jay and Mina Mehta Family Award in Preventative Medicine.



Dr. Caitlin Geiger and **Jessica Taylor** received the Department of Internal Medicine Award.



Dr. Trystan Innes received the Dr. Humera B. Chaudhary Memorial Award.



Dr. Matthew Kane received the Dr. Henry Clay Reister Award.



Dr. Katherine Keith received the Glasgow-Rubin Achievement Award.



Dr. Maya Subbanna received the James Christopher Corbin Memorial Award in Psychiatry.



Dr. McKenzie Walker received the Kevin Swabe Memorial Award.



Dr. Caylyn Yost received the Cheryl L. McLemore M.D. Memorial Pediatrics Award and the Department of Pediatrics Award.

Celebrating Dr. Tom Kwasigroch and Doug Taylor



Dr. Tom Kwasigroch, holding the first class (1982) composite, and Doug Taylor, holding the most recent class (2025) composite.

In 2025, Quillen College of Medicine celebrated two cornerstones of its legacy: Dr. Tom Kwasigroch, marking 45 years of service, and Doug Taylor, celebrating 50 years of service.

As original faculty and staff, they've shaped every Quillen physician since the school's inception in 1978. Their humor, grit and dedication are now honored through scholarships established by grateful alumni.

Kwasigroch arrived at Quillen against all advice. Fresh from a fellowship in Berlin, he turned down offers from Duke and others, drawn to the

chance to build a medical school from scratch.

"How often do you get to do that?" Kwasigroch laughed.

Taylor, meanwhile, was "drafted" for a job he didn't want.

"Best interview I ever had," he chuckles, recalling how Quillen's people won him over.

Their paths crossed over cold beers at the anatomy department's Friday gatherings, where they discovered a shared Vietnam experience — complete with tales of a black bear strolling through their firebase.

Together, they've been the heart of Quillen's

"Our job is to guide them and get out of their way"

-Dr. Tom Kwasigroch

mission. Taylor pioneered a holistic admissions process, seeking students with “grit” who rose from nothing, and those who overcame challenges to get to medical school.

“I want to send my family to a doctor I trust,” Taylor said, emphasizing the importance of heart, in addition to academics, in admissions.

Kwasigroch said teaching in the “trenches” instilled teamwork and resilience, inspired by students who overcame odds.

“Our job is to guide them and get out of their way,” he said.

Their camaraderie, forged through decades, reflects Quillen’s collaborative spirit. They’ve seen the school grow from its first class of 23 students to today’s 78-strong cohorts, never losing sight of its rural mission.

The scholarships in their names are a testament to their impact. Dr. Rick Reuhland, an alum from Quillen’s inaugural 1982 class, honored Kwasigroch for his mentorship, while Dr. Chad Thomas from the class of 2001 recognized Taylor’s knack for spotting potential.

“Our graduates do cool, unique things,” Taylor said proudly.

“They’re physicians to trust — people who care deeply about their patients,” Kwasigroch added.

“Our graduates do cool, unique things.”

– Doug Taylor

“They’re physicians to trust — people who care deeply about their patients.”

– Dr. Tom Kwasigroch

From connecting alumni with rural patients to inspiring students, they’ve built a legacy of service.

As Quillen celebrates these pioneers, the message from Kwasigroch and Taylor to alumni is clear: “We’re proud of you,” they say, citing graduates who quietly transform communities.

With scholarships ensuring their influence endures to train the next generation of physicians, Kwasigroch and Taylor remain Quillen’s beating heart, proving that grit, humor, and dedication make the dream work.

To join fellow alums in supporting the Doug Taylor or Dr. Thomas Kwasigroch scholarships, contact Quillen Director of Development Karin Von Kaenel at vonkaenel@etsu.edu or (423) 439-6316.



Quillen's Kwasigroch, Jia Earn Distinguished Faculty Awards



From left, Drs. Cuihong Jia, Andrew Joyner and Tom Kwasigroch

Drs. Tom Kwasigroch and Cuihong Jia were presented with the Distinguished Faculty Awards in Teaching and Research in 2024 – East Tennessee State University's highest honor bestowed upon a professor.

Each honoree receives a one-of-a-kind, hand-blown glass piece and a \$7,500 prize provided by the ETSU Foundation.

The Distinguished Faculty Award in Teaching was presented to Dr. Tom Kwasigroch, who has guided medical students through the intricacies of medical gross anatomy at Quillen College of Medicine for 45 years.

As technology has evolved from chalkboards to 3D imaging, Kwasigroch's teaching philosophy has remained consistent.

"Hands-on learning is critical," said Kwasigroch, Professor in the Department of Medical Education.

Kwasigroch has received numerous teaching accolades throughout his academic career, including two national awards: the Alpha Omega Alpha Robert J. Glaser Distinguished Teacher Award and the McCann National Award in Teaching and Mentoring. He was also honored with the Quillen Dean's Distinguished Award, is a 15-time recipient of the Quillen Course of the Year award, a 16-time recipient of the Quillen Professor of the Year award and a faculty hooder at commencement for 15 graduating classes.

Kwasigroch's nomination packet for the Distinguished Faculty Award emphasizes his innovation in teaching, coupled with his dedication to students.

Dr. Cuihong Jia, an Associate Professor in the ETSU Quillen College of Medicine's Department of Biomedical Sciences, earned the Distinguished Faculty Award in Research.

Jia, who joined ETSU in 2014, has nearly three dozen publications under her belt and has quickly established herself as one of the university's premier researchers – translating \$50,000 in internal college grants to more than \$2.5 million in federal funding, including \$662,499 from the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Department of Defense in 2024.

Much of Jia's research is on neurological issues, including the sense of smell, post-traumatic stress disorder, and multiple sclerosis.

Since joining the college, Jia has trained more than two dozen students in her lab and is a sought-after educator for research students. In her nomination packet, previous students complimented Jia, crediting her with their successful applications to graduate and medical schools.

Dr. Andrew Joyner, an Associate Professor in the College of Arts and Sciences' Department of Geosciences, received the Distinguished Faculty Award for Service.

By Jonathan Roberts

In Memoriam



Dr. Jeffrey L Ardell

February 12, 2025; Piney Flats, TN

Dr. Jeffrey (Jeff) Ardell, 73, was a distinguished neurocardiologist, esteemed professor and devoted husband, father and grandfather. Dr. Ardell, who served as a Professor in the Department of Biomedical Sciences and Vice Chair for Research at the Quillen College of Medicine from 1998–2014, received the ETSU Distinguished Faculty Award for Research in 2007.



Dr. William Scott Champney

February 27, 2025; Johnson City, TN

Dr. William Scott Champney, 82, enjoyed a distinguished career as a Professor of Biochemistry at Quillen College of Medicine. He was especially proud of the 12 students who received their Ph.D.s under his supervision during his career. Compassionate and dedicated, he supported many students as a professor, writer and research scientist.



Dr. Rufus Norman Crossing, M.D. '87

June 16, 2024; Atlanta, GA

Dr. Rufus Norman Crossing, 63, passed away peacefully after a long illness. He was a compassionate OB/GYN who worked for over 30 years with Kaiser Permanente, delivering thousands of babies at Piedmont and Emory University Hospitals. Known for his love of family, Norman enjoyed fishing, boating and traveling in his retirement.



Dr. Christopher Joseph Downs, M.D. '89, RES '92

December 24, 2024; Johnson City, TN

Dr. Christopher Joseph Downs, 63, was a dedicated cardiologist. He taught at Quillen College of Medicine and practiced at Johnson City Medical Center. He co-owned Heart & Vascular Medical Practice and the former Sushi Blues restaurant. Passionate about music, cooking and traveling, Christopher will be remembered for his kindness, compassion and love for his patients and family.



Dr. Trevor Jason Gage, B.S. '93, M.D. '99, RES '02

January 19, 2025; Johnson City, TN

Dr. Trevor Jason Gage, 53, passed away after a courageous 16-year battle with cancer. Dr. Gage was a native and lifelong resident of Johnson City and spent many years serving the community as a pediatrician and impacting countless lives. He was deeply involved in local youth sports, coaching and mentoring children while inspiring others with his unwavering faith and dedication to his family.



Dr. Joseph "Pete" Earl Kelley Jr., M.D. '86

November 6, 2024; Signal Mountain, TN

Dr. Joseph "Pete" Earl Kelley Jr., 64, dedicated 26 years of his life to pediatric surgery at Erlanger Hospital, saving countless children's lives with his expertise and compassion. He considered his family his greatest achievement in life. Known for his sense of humor and kindness toward others, he was deeply cherished.

Dr. William Scott Long, M.D. '84

November 29, 2023; Seminole County, FL

Dr. William Scott Long, 85, was a hospice and palliative medicine physician at Connecticut Hospice in New Haven, Connecticut for many years, retiring in 2015. Dr. Long was an excellent and talented physician who cared deeply for his hospice patients.



Dr. Evan William Murray, M.D. '89, RES '92

July 15, 2024; Memphis, TN

Dr. Evan William Murray, 71, was an infectious disease specialist in private practice for many years. Passionate about sports, especially the University of Memphis Tigers, he played college baseball at Rhodes College (formerly Southwestern) and coached baseball for many years at Temple Israel. Evan will be remembered for his love of family, animals and sports.



Dr. Norman L Rexrode Jr., RES '80

July 10, 2024; Lebanon, VA

Dr. Norman Leon Rexrode Jr., 72, dedicated his life to medicine and service. A graduate of WVU Medical School, he practiced for 42 years, mentored future EMS workers, and taught paramedic classes. Deeply involved in his community, he volunteered for Emergency Services and served Lebanon Memorial United Methodist Church with faith and kindness.



Dr. Vijay R Singh, RES '03

July 10, 2024; Johnson City, TN

Dr. Vijay Singh, 65, was a highly respected physician who founded Imperial Family Medicine. Over 20 years, he provided compassionate and sincere care, deeply committed to his patients and community. Known for his generous heart, lighthearted nature and love of music, Vijay will be remembered as a devoted father, loving husband and friend to all who knew him.



Dr. Jeffrey Thomas Triplett, M.D. '89

January 26, 2025; Memphis, TN

Dr. Jeffrey "Jeff" Thomas Triplett, 61, left behind a legacy of love, care and service. A radiation oncologist, he impacted communities in Union City, TN, Paducah, KY, and beyond with a fulfilling career. Deeply devoted to his family, faith and community, Jeff will be remembered for his kindness, unwavering support, and the joy he brought to all.



Dr. Alyssa Leigh Turner, M.D. '05

September 11, 2024; Duluth, MN

Dr. Alyssa Leigh Turner, 48, was an emergency medicine pediatrician at Essentia Health in Duluth, MN. She was survived by her husband, Troy, children, CJ and Niya, and parents, Mellanie Harris and Jon Guy. Alyssa enjoyed running Grandma's Marathon, cooking, flowers, music, and having her nails painted by her daughters. She will be remembered for her dedication to her patients and family.



Dr. Dale Eugene Whitson, B.S. '80, M.D. '84, RES '87


April 24, 2025; Gray, TN

Dr. Dale Eugene Whitson, 67, co-founded State of Franklin Family Practice and later worked at Mountain Home VA Medical Center. Beloved by his patients, he volunteered nearly 40 years providing medical coverage for Daniel Boone High School football games. Cherished by his Quillen classmates and respected by his peers, he left a lasting legacy.

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