

The Imposter Syndrome exhibition hung in a local café.

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Stories of power, vulnerability and self-doubt among medical students were on display in February as part of Pittsburgh's First Friday showcase.

By organizing the art project, second-year students Catherine Pressimone and Anjana Murali sought to unveil and explore imposter syndrome—the sense that you are not really up to the job before you, that you are an intellectual fraud, however many accomplishments may have qualified you. It's a frequent reason for which medical students seek help, since chronic self-doubt and questioning one's worth can mutually exacerbate stress, depression and anxiety, says Jordan Karp, director of Mental Health Services for Pitt Med and professor of psychiatry.

"It emerges because it's mostly young people transitioning from late adolescence to adulthood," he says. "So, for some people, it's a time of identity instability."

The exhibition hung in Pittsburgh's BFG Café.

Student portraits were strung from a line of fairy lights. Below the photos were comments like: "Having the white coat, you feel like you should be respected . . . people feel as if they should respect you . . . but you come in, and you're like, Do I even remember how to take blood pressure?"

And: "There's been this pervasive worry throughout my medical and preclinical training that I am not emotionally equipped to give that kind of support to another human being. I would like to. . . ."

Murali and Pressimone asked each student questions while photographing them, including, "What are some intrinsically good qualities about yourself that are going to make you a fantastic doctor one day?"

When the interviews began, students filed into the room with nervous smiles. They didn't know what they were in for, and it was much easier to name others' positive attributes than to reflect on their own. As time went on during the interview, hesitance tended to disappear, note Murali and Pressimone. It seemed therapeutic for their fellow students to share their feelings and insecurities.

"It is important to be aware of the fact that we have a whole tribe of people who believe we can do it," says Murali. "With the right education, hard work and passion, there's no reason why we can't." *—Maggie Medoff*

—Photography by Cami Mesa