

PHOTOS BY JOSH FRANZOS. BROWN BAG ILLUSTRATION BY HARRIET RUSSELL

POWER LUNCH

BREAKING BREAD WITH DEAN LEVINE

BY CHUCK STARESINIC

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Aspiring Pitt med students will be glad to know that there is such a thing as a free lunch—at least on occasion. Once a month at the School of Medicine, a dozen med students receive an invitation to have lunch with the dean. This has been going on for well over a decade, since shortly after Arthur S. Levine, an MD, became dean of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and senior vice chancellor for the health sciences. From the beginning of his tenure at Pitt, he was determined to put students at the center of what he does. It's just before noon on a spring day, and a dozen third-year med students are milling about near the glass double doors in the lobby when they are greeted by their host.

"Hi, I'm Art. I'm your dean," he says, as he shakes hands all around. Conversation continues as the group drifts down the hall and settles around



SIMPLY FRESH DESIGNS

a long conference table. Associate Dean for Student Affairs Joan Harvey has also joined the group. Bags crinkle and soft-drink containers pop as the dean explains why he invited them.

"The truth is, there are a lot of demands on my time, and you aren't going to see me all of the time," admits Levine. "But it's important to me that you know that you can come to me with concerns you may have. In my office, students come first.

"I pay attention to every word students say to me, and we try to make changes as quickly as possible as a consequence," Levine says. (Harvey nods in agreement.) "So I want you to speak freely and to tell me what's good and what's bad."

Despite the invitation, nobody wants to begin with a criticism, so there's a good bit of heartfelt praise from students at the outset.

"I came here because of the feeling I got from people in the School of Medicine—from the admissions office staff to the faculty interviewers," says one student.

"It trickles down, too. Despite the competitive nature of medical school, there's a level of generosity and civility among the students that you don't find everywhere."

"I fought hard to get in here. It was my top choice. You hear that med school is cutthroat, but I don't see it."



"I'm on a national committee at AMSA [American Medical Student Association], and I hear stories from students at other schools. I tell them, 'We don't have that at Pitt.'"

"Do you miss California?" Levine asks Lisa Tseng, who did her undergraduate work at Berkeley.

"Yes," she replies without hesitation and with a laugh.

"You should know that it's 55 degrees and raining in Berkeley today," he tells her with a smile. "There's not a cloud in the sky, and it's almost 80 in Pittsburgh."

"I knew nothing about Pittsburgh before I came here," offers another out-of-state student. "I thought the streets were awash in kielbasa."

"Would that they were," replies the dean.

The scholarly project is a major topic of today's discussion.

A student describes a clinical research project she has implemented with a pediatrician, saying, "I have a sense of how it works now—how a research project begins with a clinical question and then is created from the ground up."

"You're all too happy," quips Levine. "I want to hear about things I can fix."

"Okay, here goes," a student ventures. "Can we get some windows in the library?" (Perhaps not; it's in the basement.)

Another student raises a scholarly project concern. His project is less traditional, and he's having trouble incorporating an exploration of health disparities into it. Lynn Egwuatu echoes his concerns, pointing out that there is a wealth of resources for students interested in laboratory science, but it's more difficult to incorporate community work into a scholarly project.

"That's a good point," says Levine.

"Joan, let's bring this up with [Associate Dean for Medical Student Research] David Hackam."

When Meghan Wilson's turn comes, she says, "Being such a nontraditional student, I get a different perspective."

She just finished a neuroscience PhD and is in the third year of the MD program. "When you interview, of course, they say they'll support you.

"But Pitt has really come through for me. Not just once—throughout. If you have a problem, you can approach the administration."

"Meghan and I go back a long time," says the dean.

Paralyzed in a high school skiing accident, Wilson was not accepted into medical school on her first try, despite a soaring GPA, a neuroscience degree, and very high MCAT scores. She began writing to medical schools to explain her situation and her interest in a dual-degree program that would allow her to help translate basic research findings into better care for patients. One of those letters came to Levine; his was the only response she received. Following that introduction, Wilson found a coveted spot in Pitt's NIH-funded Medical Scientist Training Program, a combined MD/PhD program that was exactly what she was looking for.

"I thought it would be good for the school," Levine says. "But more importantly, I thought it would be wonderful for Meghan to grow as any independent person is able to do. I wanted Meghan to achieve her potential." ■