



Jackie Hom '04

Applying the liberal arts to dentistry.

OPEN WIDE

Jackie Hom '04 sums up her goal of opening her own community dental clinic in three words: "I like teeth." She adds, with a smile that belies the intensity of her ambition, "I can't quite say why."

Perhaps it's because Hom, whose "tomboy habits" as a child led to seven cavities and several chipped teeth, became very comfortable in the dentist's chair at an early age.

During one root canal the 12-year-old elected to watch in a mirror every procedure going on inside her mouth.

By her freshman year of high school, Hom says, dentistry had become a "lifetime pursuit." She opened the phone book and called every dentist listed until she reached one who agreed to give her a job. She got all the way to "U" before the University of Washington Emergency Dental Clinic said yes. At age 14, she became the youngest person ever to volunteer there.

In the process of preparing charts for patients—taking their blood pressure, temperature and pulse and getting their medical histories—Hom says she also learned how to communicate with them: how to sit still, when to listen, when to talk, when to leave. "My purpose for those brief minutes was to aid in healing the person behind the patient," she recalls. "We were delivering more than just dental care."

By Jennifer Grow

The same was true of Hom's junior-year trip to Bolivia, when she joined 30 U.S. dentists providing education and aid to the poverty-stricken villages surrounding Cochabamba. Hom taught children how to brush and floss, helped dentists perform procedures, delivered supplies to rural orphanages and schools and delivered milk and bread throughout the community.

The spring-break trip was a hard-fought victory for Hom, whose Williams education has been funded by scholarships and grants. Though she couldn't afford the added travel expenses, she attended Kiwanis and Rotary meetings throughout the Berkshires, presented her plans and ultimately persuaded a few people to make donations.

The Issaquah, Wash., native attributes her determined spirit to her mother, who at age 20 immigrated to the United States from China. A single mother (she and Hom's father divorced when Hom was 7), Amy Yeung-Hom spoke little English but insisted that her two daughters learn the language well enough to speak without an accent. She also encouraged them to begin exploring their career options right away and never to limit themselves.

Hom was overwhelmed by her mother's advice but took the words to heart. During summers, while her peers attended day camps and sleepover parties, she anxiously tried to find a direction for her life. A talented pianist, violinist, ice skater and ballet dancer, she realized none would lead to a career, so she explored other opportunities, including paging in the House of Representatives, volunteering in hospitals and shadowing academics, doctors, software analysts, computer networkers and even nuns.

"I gained as much experience in every profession that posed even the smallest interest," she says. But in the

end, she adds, “I found that the profession that brought me the most joy and fulfillment was dentistry.”

Williams is an unlikely choice for someone interested in becoming a dentist. (Hom says she applied at the suggestion of her sister, who had several friends who were Ephs.) According to College records, only 27 living alumni, spanning the classes of 1946 to 1987, have degrees or careers in dentistry and related fields. Hom, a biology major, is currently the only undergraduate actively planning to enter the profession.

But Hom says she did not approach college as “a means to develop a skill set in order to land a lucrative job immediately after graduation.” Instead, she says, “I chose to attend a liberal arts institution where the education focused on developing mental agility and conceptualization, the capacity to analyze complex problems and the facility to make critical judgments.”

An art history course she took to fulfill a graduation requirement, for example, taught her “skills necessary for a visual and dexterous profession such as dentistry,” Hom says. “The study of art attunes the eye to detailed morphological attributes that usually go unnoticed, gives one the vocabulary to express and communicate structure and develops the manual skills to recreate what the eye sees.”

In an organic chemistry class she took sophomore year, Hom’s work caught the attention of Prof. David Richardson. “If you’re ever going to see determination, this [class] is the setting,” he says of the two-semester course. Hom, he adds, was “always focused on what she was



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learning” and, though the material wasn’t always easy for her, “when the light bulb went on, you could always see it shining.”

Hom supplemented her coursework with life experience, participating in a two-week Dental Careers Institute at the Oregon Health Sciences University School of Dentistry in Portland and in a summer undergraduate mentor program at University of California, San Francisco, School of Dentistry.

She approached her extracurricular activities with the same intensity, helping to obtain funding to create a campus figure skating club. She and another student also co-taught a physical education class in the sport.

Hom joined the Swing Club and Dance Company and choreographed a dance performed with Anne Hamilton’s *art, Across* exhibition at MASS MoCa; became active in the Newman Catholic Association and with Asian American Students in Action (serving as secretary her freshman year); tutored at the Math/Science Resource Center, serving as head tutor this year; and played piano biannually in student recitals. Beyond the campus, she’s served as a Big Sister since

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2000, distributed food for St. Patrick’s Food Pantry in Pittsfield and volunteered with Habitat for Humanity.

Nurturing her strong interest in Eastern meditation and martial arts, Hom spent this past January at the Chozen-ji Zen monastery in Honolulu, Hawaii, training in seated meditation, sword martial arts, aikido and manual labor with attention to breath, posture and the most efficient

use of the body. The training, she says, will help her to “better understand how to face suffering ... as well as the nature of healing and compassion” as a health-care provider.

After graduation, Hom plans to spend the summer doing additional training at the Sogen-ji monastery in Japan before heading to Harvard School of Dentistry, where she will be one of only 35 students in a program that allows them to create their own specialties. She hopes to pursue a concurrent master’s degree in public policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, with the goal of becoming a community dentist in the United States and perhaps managing an international nonprofit providing dental care and improving dental health policy in developing countries.

Hom says her wide-ranging experiences these past four years have taught her “how to think,” providing her with opportunities to gain confidence in herself and her abilities. Williams, she adds, is a “perfect sanctuary to learn and grow in a personal way.” ■

Jennifer Grow is assistant editor of the Williams Alumni Review.