

A STRONGER FUTURE

THE CAROLINA COVENANT EXPANDS
SCOPE AS THE PROGRAM APPROACHES
20 YEARS OF SUCCESS.

By Angela Harwood • Photos by Jen Hughey • Illustrations by DeCarlos Hickson '20



Alisa Eanes '08, '15 (MD) went from not knowing any doctors to becoming one.



Alisa Eanes '08, '15 (MD) wanted her career to serve a need. “The Carolina Covenant made such a big difference in my life,” said Eanes, an obstetrician-gynecologist in Marion, North Carolina. “I wanted to give that back. I felt like the people of North Carolina had contributed that safety net for me, and there are so few rural physicians and very few rural OB-GYNs. Marion felt like a place where I could pursue my passion but also provide a big service to the state.”

Eanes was born in California but moved to North Carolina at age 11. Both of her parents were from the Appalachian Mountains in Tennessee. She went to high school outside of Charlotte and had begun applying to colleges when she hit a roadblock.

“That was a particularly rough time in my family,” she recalled. “My parents had just gotten divorced, and neither had much income. Combined they made ends meet, but separately they weren’t able to financially support me. So I became a bit of a nomad. I stayed with my dad part of the time and otherwise with friends while I continued to apply for colleges.”

Eanes started her college studies at UNC Wilmington, “because it was the cheapest place I was accepted,” she said. She soon made the decision to transfer to UNC-Chapel Hill.

“I thought, ‘If I get accepted, I don’t know how I will afford the extra tuition.’ I’d been working my whole time at UNC Wilmington, waiting tables and working full-time in the summers to pay for college, and I had taken on some debt already. But then I got a letter from Carolina saying I had been accepted into the Carolina Covenant and my tuition would be free. I was totally overwhelmed.”

At the time, Eanes knew nothing about the Carolina Covenant, which had only just launched in 2004. The program offers outstanding low-income students a debt-free path to graduation through a combination of grants, scholarships and work-study.

“I experienced college both when I was financially responsible for everything myself and when I had the support of the Covenant,” recalled Eanes. “I went from being constantly stressed about financial planning and dedicating all my time to making enough money to pay for my needs to being able to actually engage in campus life.”

“At Chapel Hill, I was able to grow and blossom as a student, and that left me the space to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.”

Perhaps it was fate: Eanes’ work-study position was in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at UNC Hospitals. “I was filing paperwork and answering phones, and then I started participating in some of the research studies,” she said. “It ended up being my first job after graduation, doing research there.”

Eanes said she hadn’t considered medicine as a career path until she came to Chapel Hill. “No one in my family was a doctor or is a doctor, and I had never even met a doctor,” she laughed. Covenant Scholars have access to mentoring, academic and personal support services. The late Charlie van der Horst, former professor of medicine and internationally renowned HIV researcher, was one of Eanes’ mentors.

“He was active in the Covenant when I was coming through school, and I got a lot of encouragement from him that I could do it — become a doctor — which I really needed. Having someone in the field look at me and tell me that I was capable gave me the confidence to pursue medicine. He helped me navigate the MCAT, the pre-requisites, the volunteering — all the important steps that are hard to figure out without inside knowledge.”

Eanes kept up with her science classes to make sure her options remained open. She volunteered at the local rape crisis center and became a doula (a birth support coach). She even found time to start a student organization to support transfer students in their transition to Chapel Hill.

“All of those things helped me formulate my interest in helping others and in gynecology and medicine,” said Eanes.

After double-majoring in women’s studies and psychology and minoring in chemistry, Eanes enrolled in medical school at Carolina. Her OB-GYN rotations solidified her career path.

“I felt like I could be an advocate for women in a space that is deeply personal and private,” she said.

“Helping them navigate some of the best and worst days of their lives — that connection felt intimate, and I was very interested in rural health care and access in North Carolina.”

Today, Eanes works with two other ob-gyns and three midwives at Mission Hospital McDowell. She sees patients for routine prenatal and gynecological care, and she’s on call every three days, delivering babies.

“Most of my patients are born and raised and stay right here in McDowell County,” she said. “It’s a tight-knit community that’s been here a long time, and it feels really cool to be able to provide excellent care within my rural practice setting. Rural hospitals around the country have been closing, mostly due to financial issues, but ours is thriving. To be part of that feels like an exception, and it’s exciting.”



Opposite page: Eanes performs an ultrasound for an expecting mother. As an OB-GYN at Mission Hospital McDowell, Eanes and her team deliver more than 300 babies a year.



Carolina Covenant Scholar Sonny Griffith '23 is taking an unusual path to medical school, majoring in English with a concentration in science, medicine and literature.

THE COVENANT TODAY

Since Eanes' time in the Covenant, the program has steadily expanded — from an initial class of 233 students to approximately 10% of Carolina's entire undergraduate population. The program is also evolving to meet the needs of current students.

When Eanes was a student, its primary focus was to help students financially and provide them with the support and mentorship to graduate on time.

“The Covenant was a groundbreaking initiative to ensure that Carolina could recruit and retain talented students, no matter their income,” said Candice Powell '06, '21 (PhD), director of the Carolina Covenant. “In founding the Covenant, Carolina became a national model for low-income student success — those quantitative outcomes are evident. We have demonstrated the dramatic increase in student retention and graduation rates for this population of students.

“But the Covenant program isn't static,” Powell continued. “It is now our responsibility to help students thrive beyond degree completion. We are building on the network of the thousands of Covenant alumni, like Alisa, who can provide that full-circle investment to connect with one another and help new Covenant Scholars make the most of their careers.”

With support from the University, senior administration and many campus partners, Powell has spearheaded the Connecting Carolina Covenant Scholars initiative, a robust system of professional development for students that includes career mentors and liaisons at all of Carolina's professional schools.

For example, with the help of the Carolina Covenant's Rural Medicine Pathway Program, Kainat Aslam '21, '25 (MD) is now a medical student fulfilling her dreams to become a doctor. The program is a collaboration

between the Covenant and the UNC School of Medicine that supports Covenant Scholars as they pursue health careers in rural areas.

Much like Eanes, Aslam is already thinking of ways to give back. While in medical school, she hopes to mentor undergraduates in the Rural Medicine Pathway Program. “I’m proud of where I am and of the work that has gotten me to this point,” she said. “I’m still at the first step but also want to remember to give back and to help other people on that journey as well.”

Sonny Griffith ’23 also has his sights set on medical school with the eventual goal of working in rural family medicine. He spent the summer of 2022 taking part in the Covenant’s Career Accelerator Program, thanks to a grant from Strada Education Network. The program makes internships, research, service- and global-learning opportunities more accessible to Covenant students over the summer months when less financial aid is available, a situation that causes many students to forgo career-enhancing experiences in favor of less meaningful jobs to cover expenses.

Griffith used the funding to support himself while he researched historic treatments for opioid addiction. “It gave me the opportunity to travel and network that I wouldn’t have had otherwise,” he said.

ALUMNI ADVISORS

Of course, not all Covenant students pursue medical degrees, and mentorship plays just as important a role in other career fields. Of currently enrolled Covenant students, the top five majors are biology, psychology, computer science, exercise and sport science, and business administration.

Carolina Covenant alumni, who boast significant academic and professional achievements, are part of the story of the Covenant’s success. They’re also great mentors. That’s why another new aspect of the Covenant is the Carolina Covenant Alumni Advisory Board.

“Alumni engagement is critical to the continued momentum, interest and investment in the Covenant and to sustaining our current and future scholars,” said Powell. ▶



Candice Powell, director of the Carolina Covenant, thinks of the program as a campus-wide commitment to student success — at Carolina and beyond.

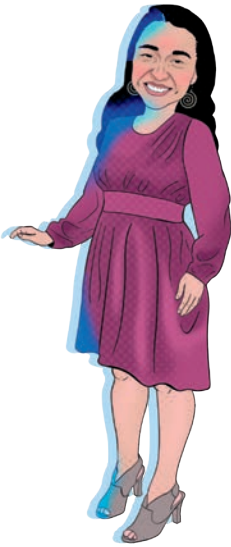
“The benefit of the Covenant is that it is not just financial aid. It’s a facilitator of high-impact opportunities and connections that help students apply their talents and gifts in a way that will help them fulfill their purpose in the wider world that we all share.”

— CANDICE POWELL

MEET THE

CAROLINA COVENANT

ALUMNI ADVISORY BOARD



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Chapel Hill, NC



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Charlotte, NC



**ALISA
EANES '08, '15 (MD)**
Obstetrician-Gynecologist
Marion, NC



BRIAN WOODARD '09
Assistant Director
for Admissions
Chapel Hill, NC

The Carolina Covenant Alumni Advisory Board helps guide strategies to help current and former Covenant Scholars succeed in their careers. The Covenant's alumni engagement efforts, including the work of the board, are led by Associate Director Ann Trollinger, who has provided support for the program from its earliest years to the present day.



**AMAYA MARTINEZ
MESA '17**
Medical Student
Chapel Hill, NC



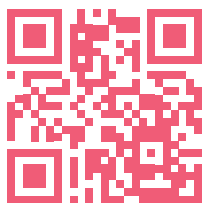
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TYLER HAUGLE '21
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**SHELBY
SUGIERSKI '14**
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ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR: A CAROLINA TO HOLLYWOOD DREAM

Carolina Covenant alum and advisory board member DeCarlos Hickson '20 went from working as a security guard while attending community college to a career in animation at a global entertainment company. Scan the QR code to learn more about Hickson's Carolina Story.