

URI initiative helps older student chart a path to medical school

Health pre-advising program assists both traditional and non-traditional students



Christopher Phothisane of Providence, left, worked with Andrew Simmons, director of URI's Pre-Health Professions Advising Program, to prepare his applications to medical school. Phothisane, who is following a non-traditional path to graduation in May, has been accepted to the Alpert Medical School.

URI PHOTO/NORA LEWIS

KINGSTON – At age 33, **CHRISTOPHER PHOTHISANE** of Providence is not your typical college student. For a long time, he saw that as a liability. Now, as he prepares to graduate from the University of Rhode Island in May with a double major in biology and psychology – and an acceptance letter to Brown University's medical school in hand – Phothisane understands that his non-traditional journey is actually a strength.

He came to this realization with the help of **ANDREW SIMMONS**, director of URI's Pre-Health Professions Advising Program, which assists students in all majors prepare to apply to medical, dental, optometry, physician assistant, and other post-graduate professional health programs.

Simmons changed Phothisane's perspective by helping him understand that his background gave him experience and dignity. "I'm always surprised by the modesty and self-effacing nature of many (non-traditional) students. They have so much going for them and don't realize it," Simmons said.

Phothisane certainly didn't realize it. He barely graduated high school in Providence, where he lived with his American mother and Chinese father – who immigrated from Laos – his siblings and grandparents. When he was a teen, his parents divorced, and his grandparents battled cancer. Money was tight, so Phothisane started working as a dishwasher, cook, security guard, and postal carrier. It wasn't until he was laid off six years ago that he began thinking about education.

He enrolled at the Community College of Rhode Island, where he excelled, and was admitted to URI in 2015. He also began volunteering with a Brown University researcher studying autism. The more he learned, the more he wanted to know. "It was not about what I wanted to do but what I wanted to be," he said.

With an understanding of what he wanted, an unwavering work ethic – attending school full-time, volunteering at Brown, and working as a security guard – and the support of URI's Pre-Health Professions Advising Program,

Phothisane has made med school happen.

"He asked about our program on a whim, but I don't think he thought I would say, 'let's explore it,'" Simmons said. "It was clear he was someone medical schools should consider, based on his native intelligence and personal attributes."

Housed within the University's Honors Program, Pre-Health Advising aligns with URI's Office of National Fellowships, Brown's Warren Alpert School of Medicine Early Identification Program, and Johnson and Wales University's physician assistant master's, among other resources. Students interested in pre-health advising need not be part of the Honors Program.

Pre-Health advisors counsel more than 600 students and alumni on the demands of preparing for admission to

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graduate school in the health fields and help them overcome challenges. "There is a self-reflective element to it. You quickly become aware of your strengths and weaknesses in a way you have not confronted before," Simmons said.

Not all who participate will pursue health professions, but the program helps students find their path.

Now, well on his path to becoming the first member of his family to graduate from college, Phothisane offers advice to others contemplating their futures: "Take the first step and keep moving forward. Don't get discouraged." ❖

Story courtesy URI