

EYES ON THE HEALTH PROFESSIONS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

with LT. Caroline Kernan, D.O.



By Faraz Syed, MS, OMS-III

The Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP) is a scholarship provided by the military in which medical students can apply to serve as a physician in either the Army, Navy or Air Force. Each of the three branches accepts roughly 300 to 500 medical students per cycle with roughly 1200 awardees per year. The scholarship pays the medical student's tuition, book fees and provides a monthly stipend in exchange for a commitment to serve as a physician in the military for 3-4 years post-residency. Students who receive the scholarship undergo officer training throughout medical school and participate in the Military Match, formally known as the Joint Service Graduate Medical Education Selection Board (JSGMESB). For the most up-to-date information, please visit the HPSP website.

Dr. LT. Caroline Kernan graduated from Marian University Wood College of Osteopathic Medicine (MU-WCOM) in 2024 and is currently a PGY-2 ophthalmology resident at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego, CA. I spoke to Caroline about her journey to MU-WCOM, her experience as a recipient of the Health Professions Scholarship Program (HPSP) scholarship and her love for ophthalmology.

Tell me about your path to Marian and medical school? Did you grow up nearby?

I spent most of my life in Dayton, Ohio. So, I wasn't too far away. I pursued my undergraduate in South Bend at Saint Mary's College intent on nursing. Along the way, I spent time in Phoenix, AZ at a Crisis Pregnancy Shelter

HPSP at a Glance



Military scholarship for medical students



Covers tuition, books, and a monthly stipend



Service commitment after residency

where I cared for the residents as the House Manager. I lived alongside pregnant women and new mothers, supporting them in every step of their journey. This experience is what drove me towards obstetrics and gynecology (OB/GYN). However, I ultimately decided on ophthalmology in my second year of medical school.

I visited MU-WCOM while I was still an undergraduate student. My faith is very important to me, and I ultimately found Marian to be an excellent fit. My journey at Marian began in their BMS program. The program has an incredible staff and prepared me for medical school. I matriculated into Marian's medical school the next year.

What motivated you to apply for the HPSP scholarship?

I have always had a strong connection with the military community. Both of my parents served in the Air Force. My mother was a nurse in the

Air Force and my father was an Oral & Maxillofacial Surgeon (OMFS). Over the years, my parents continued to stay connected to the community and that played a big role in my decision to apply for HPSP. I can't overstate how important the military community is to me.

How did the HPSP scholarship shape your medical school experience? Were you on the same timeline and rotations as you classmates?

Connecting with the other HPSP recipients in my class was a blessing. We ended up becoming good friends and spent a lot of time together. Beyond that, I was required to perform 45 days of paid, active-duty service every year. This was essentially training in a military facility within the U.S. My first officer training was during the summer between first and second year of medical school and the next was immediately after I took the Comprehensive Medical Licensure Examination (COMLEX) Level 1 at the end of second year. I actually took the exam pretty early, just a few days after the school year ended. My third and fourth year were split between rotating at military hospitals as well as some civilian sites.

What was the most impactful part of receiving the scholarship?

The community. The military community was the best part of HPSP. I trained and worked with engineers, nurses and other professionals. All of us had a common goal, almost like an 'additional mission', to prepare our soldiers and honor their commitments. The military community, and training with such a vast array of individuals, really made the military feel smaller.

I'm sure that you have hundreds of stories to tell. How have these experiences influenced the care that you provide to your patients?

I see veterans, active-duty personnel and their families. For me, this is a special privilege and a way to thank them for everything that they have done. One of my oldest patients is a great exam-

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ple of this. He is a WWII veteran that is over 100 years old. I love to hear his stories. Whenever I speak with my patients, I am always reminded of the importance of what I do and why I need to continuously improve myself and my skills.

What is it like to serve in your unique position in the military? You are not necessarily on the front lines like many people picture when they think about military personnel.

It is interesting that most jobs in the military are not on the front lines like many of us picture in our heads. There are many supporting roles or you could say 'behind the scenes' jobs. Preparing a medically ready force plays a very important part in fulfilling our mission of protecting our nation.

As a Navy doctor, I have the honor of taking care of active-duty military who are sacrificing a lot to fulfill that same mission. I also take care of their family members who are their essential support systems, and retirees who have already sacrificed so much. We touched on this earlier, but our job is unique because we encounter every aspect of the military world through our patients and their stories.

What was the military match like?

For me, it consisted of two away rotations at military hospitals within the United States. After I completed those, I finished the regular fourth year core rotations. The military match was in December of my fourth year.

You mentioned that you initially wanted to be an OB/GYN. What made you decide to become an U.S. Navy Ophthalmologist?

My experience at the Crisis Pregnancy Shelter really motivated me towards becoming an Obstetrician and Gynecologist. However, after praying and seeking counsel, I moved away from that field and began exploring other opportunities. During my second year Neuro, EENT and Motor Systems (NEMS) course at MU-WCOM, I was very briefly introduced to ophthalmology. I began shadowing a local ophthalmologist and soon realized that the eyes are like a window into the body. They often manifest symptoms that are indicative of serious systemic diseases. These need to be adequately treated. I also enjoyed seeing the life-changing impact that many minor ophthalmic procedures have. In just a few minutes, patients that have lost their vision due to cataracts can have their sight restored. What can feel better than that?

Do you have any advice for students who are considering the HPSP scholarship, specifically what to consider before applying?

It is important to research military life and know how it differs from civilian life. Talk to people in the military. Moving around the United States and outside the country after residency is an expectation, so it becomes a family decision. In the end of the day, students will either pay for medical school with money or with time and it is important to understand both.

One of the ways that military life differs is, as a Naval Medical Officer, I wear my uniform to clinic. I take care of officers of all ranks, higher and lower than me. For that reason, I am always expected to lead by example. My uniform must be spotless, and I must always be ready to follow orders and sacrifice where it is needed.

What does residency look like for an HPSP-recipient, and what opportunities are available post-residency?

Residency is within the U.S., often at a military hospital on a military base. I am at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego. After residency, HPSP recipients will either work in a major military training facility or be deployed in an operational setting. That looks different depending on which branch of the military a doctor is serving in. Since I am in the Navy, I have the option of either being dispatched to a Navy ship or being stationed at 1 of 4 military facilities across the globe. Those in the Air Force can be assigned to an air battalion, for example. There are many different opportunities to serve but since I am still in residency, I am not familiar with all of them just yet.

One of the unique aspects of a military residency is that we spend a significant amount of time learning the basics of our equipment. We do this in case we ever need to teach others or have to set up our equipment on our own. For example, a surgery resident is essentially expected to learn how to be a surgical technician and know the 'ins and outs' of the machinery before becoming a surgeon.

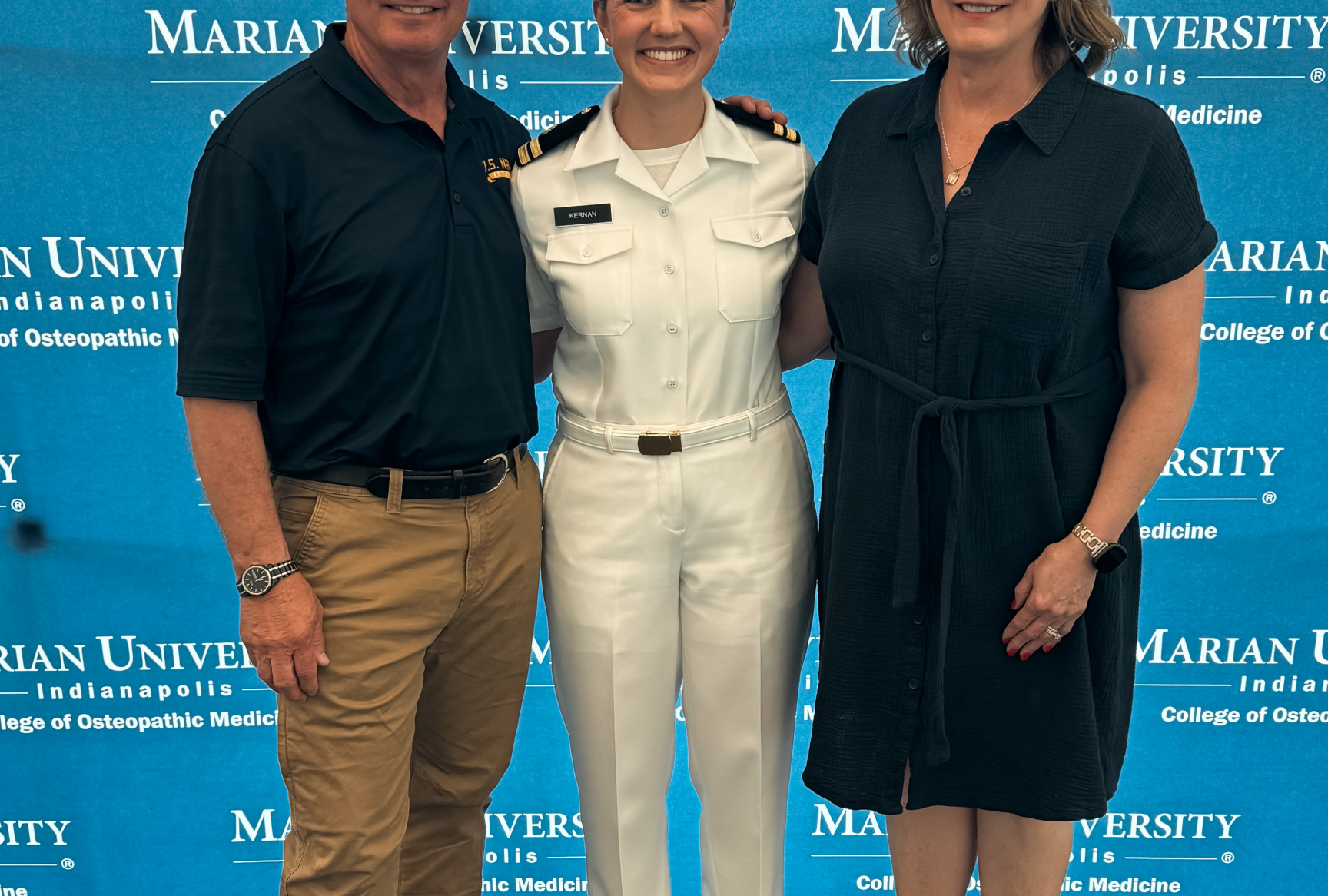
A note from the author:

I am grateful to Caroline for her time. A 30-minute conversation quickly became an hour, which could have easily turned into many hours. It was a pleasure to hear about Caroline's story and how MU-WCOM and the HPSP scholarship continue to impact her life and the lives of her valued patients.

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LT Caroline Kernan pictured with parents