Whitt building bridges to healthy UAB workforce

Lauren Whitt’s dissertation examined the resiliency of college athletes despite setbacks and disappointments, a topic with which she was more than familiar.

The former Vanderbilt University soccer standout tore the anterior cruciate ligament in her left knee the first game of her sophomore season. She tore it again 10 months later playing semi-pro ball in North Carolina. She had to redshirt her sophomore and junior years at Vanderbilt, but returned to play two years with the Commodores before transferring to Clemson to play a sixth year of eligibility.

The time not spent playing gave Whitt an opportunity to look at soccer from a much broader perspective and ultimately set her career path. She examined all of the moving pieces that make a team successful.

“I really got to study the coaching, organization, strategy behind decision-making and the little things required to make a group successful,” Whitt says. “And it is the little things that make the biggest difference in success for a team of people.”

That’s the message Whitt has preached in previous stops at Alabama Power and the Nutrition Obesity Research Center. He is world renowned for his work in obesity and statistical genetics. He is the principal investigator on 14 instrumentation grants and clinical trials from the National Institutes of Health and other sponsors. And he has published more than 400 peer-reviewed papers.

So you might think David Allison, Ph.D., doesn’t have time for anything but work. The dual wooden-timer clock on his desk proves otherwise. He has two pieces of paper taped above the clocks. One reads “Politics and Gossip.” The other reads “Whining and Moaning.”

“I allow an hour a week for both,” Allison says. “Hey — we all need to indulge in these human needs for intellectual junk food — but moderation is the key.”

Climate Survey brings changes in Financial Affairs

The 2010 Faculty and Staff Climate Survey was the first of its kind at UAB. It gave employees an opportunity to give constructive feedback on issues of concern to them.

Numerous organizations across campus have implemented changes as a result of the survey, including Human Resources, whose efforts were featured in the Aug. 8 issue of the UAB Reporter.

Another group that has made a concerted effort to facilitate change is Financial Affairs. The division has implemented recurring training classes, changed the organizational structure of the group and developed a new employer evaluation form, among other notable changes. Technology is there to stay. We’ve gone through the performance evaluations, completed them this summer, and we’ve made a commitment to the staff that we will do them again next March.

“We really wanted to set reasonable goals and make sure we live up to them so the staff will see that we are listening to them.”

Benefits open enrollment to close Oct. 14, help available

Annual Open Enrollment for medical, dental, vision, voluntary AD&D insurance coverage and flexible spending accounts (FSAs) for all UAB benefits-eligible employees is under way and will end at 5 p.m. Friday, Oct. 14.

Web instructions can be found online at www.hrm.uab.edu and in the packet that was mailed to employees’ homes. In order to comply with federal laws regulating benefit plan participation and payroll, “We thought it was important for us as an organization to set reasonable goals for change for our employees, and we wanted to make sure that these goals became part of our culture,” McMinn says. “We didn’t want just one big bang and then it’s gone. We’ve started these training classes, and they are there to stay. We’ve gone through the performance evaluations, completed them this summer, and we’ve made a commitment to the staff that we will do them again next March.

“We really wanted to set reasonable goals and make sure we live up to them so the staff will see that we are listening to them.”
Events to support breast-cancer research

This October, the Breast Cancer Research Foundation of Alabama and stores and restaurants at The Summit will host Go Pink events during Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Proceeds will benefit the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Upcoming activities:

Oct. 8 - Revpin’ 4 Research: The Dixie Divas Riding Club will host its annual event with 600 bikers riding for breast cancer research, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Heart of Dixie-Harley Davidson, 333 North Cahaba Valley Parkway in Pelham. More information is available at www.revpinresearch.com.

Oct. 16 – Belk Private Shopping Event: An after-hours storewide shopping event with discounts, door prizes, food, music and drawings, 6:30 to 9 p.m. Tickets are $25. More information is available at www.pinkprivateshoppingnight.com.

Oct. 17-21 – Restaurant Week at The Summit: A percentage of sales from participating restaurants will benefit the BCRF.

Oct. 25 – Gus Mayer Pink Runway/ Fashion Show with Christian Siriano:

The “Project Runway” winner will showcase his spring 2012 collection, 6 to 8 p.m. in Gus Mayer. Reserved seated tickets are $100 and limited; standing-room-only tickets are $50. More information is available at www.gusmayer.com.

OCT. 31 - Trick or Treat for the PINK: Children are invited to trick-or-treat at participating stores.

Patty Griffin, guest Buddy Miller at UAB’s Alys Stephens Center

Birmingham fans eager to see Patty Griffin at UAB’s Alys Stephens Performing Arts Center have a special treat in store — she’ll be joined by friend and special musical guest Buddy Miller.

See Griffin and Miller perform together at 8 p.m. Friday, Oct. 7 in UAB’s Alys Stephens Center, 1200 10th Ave. South. Tickets are $59, $52, $39; student tickets are $20. To purchase tickets or for more information call 975-2787 or visit the center online at www.AlysStephens.org.

Parcak to be featured on Discovery Channel

Egyptologist Sarah Parcak, Ph.D., associate professor of anthropology in the College of Arts & Sciences, will be featured in the documentary “Egypt: What Lies Beneath?“ on the Discovery Channel, Sunday, Oct. 9 at 8 p.m. The show is a part of the TV series “Curiosity” hosted by actor Brendan Fraser. Parcak will reveal ancient finds that she discovered in Egypt using satellite imagery.

Cyndi Lauper and Dr. John at ASC Oct. 9

Cyndi Lauper and Dr. John will make beautiful music together when they perform their show “From Memphis to Mardi Gras” at UAB’s Alys Stephens Performing Arts Center Sunday, Oct. 9.

“From Memphis to Mardi Gras” celebrates the signature music of two great American cities with two of music’s most colorful artists. The show will begin at 7 p.m. in UAB’s Alys Stephens Center. Tickets are $69.50, $59.50 and $49.50. A limited number of VIP meet-and-greet tickets are available. Call 975-2787 or visit www.AlysStephens.org.

Alsip named first chief medical information officer

Jorge Alsip, M.D., has joined as UAB Health System’s first chief medical information officer. Alsip will work closely with the medical staff to develop the clinical strategy for the continued application of health information technology at UAB and ensure that technology decisions are aligned with the health system’s commitment to provide the highest quality patient care. Alsip will also hold a faculty appointment in the Department of Emergency Medicine.
Steam plant project heats up, more road closings ahead

Jerry Corvin glanced at his calendar during a conversation recently and almost couldn't believe it — construction of the UAB District Steam System Project is one year away from completion.

“We've got a hard 15 months ahead of us with a lot of pre-testing and commissioning activities for final steam production,” the senior project manager says. “It's going to be a hard road.”

Construction now will be more visible throughout campus and periodically interfere with campus foot and vehicle traffic, as it has with the recent closure of 14th Street between Seventh Avenue and University Boulevard. That block was closed Sept. 23 and is expected to remain closed to traffic traveling in both directions until Oct. 26.

“That area of 14th Street is a critical path item for us,” Corvin says. “We've got very deep excavation at that point. The ditches are very wide, and we can't put steel plates across them for traffic. We're going to have to keep it closed until the third week of October, but we'll work diligently to try and advance that if we can.”

Once 14th Street reopens, 16th Street next to the Campus Recreation Center will be closed next. Corvin anticipates that will take place within a week of completion of the 14th Street work.

“We expect 16th Street to be closed for approximately three weeks starting around the third or fourth week of October,” Corvin says. “We’ll have piping operations going on from that time until late November, and it will affect traffic on one lane of University.”

The south lane of the east bound two lanes between 16th Street and the pedestrian bridge at the School of Nursing will be closed to traffic during this phase of construction. The UAB Project Management team and contractor are talking with the Alabama Department of Transportation about working around the clock during this period in an attempt to finish the work more quickly and, consequently, reopen the affected lane to traffic as soon as possible.

Weekly construction schedules are available to the public at www.uab.edu/steamproject. Detailed information, including maps, construction projects, frequently asked questions (FAQs) and contact information also are available.

Current project work

Work on the project is ongoing throughout what are termed the north and south loops, and construction also has begun on the physical plant at Sixth Avenue and 13th Street across from Barton.

Construction of the steam vault in front of the Rec Center is expected to be complete in a few weeks. When finished, the landscape will be refreshed and the pedestrian sidewalk will again be open.

Additional operations began in the School of Nursing parking deck in September. They should be completed the third week of October. The project will then move into Unity Park at the corner of 18th Street and University Boulevard next to the School of Nursing.

“We will be affecting the Unity Park area for quite a length of time — from early October until mid-February,” Corvin says.

North loop operations are under way on the west side of Volker Hall. Steam vaults are under construction on Seventh Avenue behind Volker and near the entry of Volker and Lister Hill Library on the backside of Seventh Avenue.

Piping installation is scheduled through a portion of the Spain Wallace Hospital within the next few weeks and should be complete in mid-December. Future segments of the hospital work will include running the piping through the underground tunnel to the General Services Building. Also, related hospital piping will be installed on the overhead bridge across 18th Street between Spain Rehab and Spain Wallace.

“It’s more practicable in this case to go over the street,” Corvin says. “The street is all rock at a depth of 22 feet. It would have required a lot of time, excessive noise and excavation that wasn’t economically feasible.”

Excavation on the steam plant site began in September and is running a little ahead of schedule. Based on the current schedule, workers should be deep into forming and pouring the floor slab for the steam plant building around the first to middle of November. Steel erection will begin in mid-November and go into February. Those interested in watching the construction of the plant will soon be able to do so 24 hours a day via the project’s website at www.uab.edu/steamproject.

“We're going to put a camera up on Bartow that should be in operation in the middle of October,” Corvin says. “Anyone will be able to call that up on our website and see the progress.”

The boilers for the plant are on target for delivery in mid-December. The package for their installation will be bid the third week of October.

Corvin says perhaps the biggest — and the best — news has been that there have been few problems with construction to this point.

“We're trying to be ahead of the curve, and we've been very fortunate for the most part,” Corvin says. “Any problems with regard to issues or the unexpected have been minimal. The more we open up the ground, the greater our chance of encountering problems. I'm sure we'll have our share of problems — all construction does. But we are charged with solving the problems, and that's what we'll do.”

Weekly construction updates are available at www.uab.edu/steamproject/specialalerts.

Alum’s cozy portraits on show at UAB Visual Arts Gallery

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Kristin Skees, a UAB Department of Art and Art History alumna, will present a selection of her "cozy portraits" and custom-knit "cozies" in an exhibition Oct. 6 to Oct. 29 at the UAB Visual Arts Gallery. The show is free and open to the public. The exhibition will feature a free reception from 5 to 8 p.m. Oct. 14 in the gallery.

"Cozyied" depicts custom-knit works that Skees creates, and that are worn by her subjects as she photographs them in comfortable, domestic settings. Given the juxtaposition of the "cozy" — covered person and their often mundane surroundings, her works could best be described as uncanny, discomfiting or charged with a certain sense of unease.

Skees, a 2003 UAB bachelor of fine arts graduate and professor of art at Christopher Newport College, taught herself to knit during a year off from school. "After covering a series of small objects, I created 'husband cozy,'" she says. Skees says she sees the cozies as both protective and prohibitive. "We often cozy things that we want to remain undamaged, but when you apply the same approach to a person it limits their abilities in a very weird way." The exhibition also will feature a selection of the actual cozies.

"I wanted to be sure to highlight the fact that Kristin's works exist in a space between photography and sculpture," says Gallery Director Brett Levine, who curated the show.

Gallery hours are Monday through Thursday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday 1 to 5 p.m. The gallery is closed Sunday and holidays.
and making changes," McMinn says. Promotions, evaluations, training, building safety and parking were the subjects most identified as areas of focus by Financial Affairs staff in the survey. Focus group meetings were held in the division to discuss the results of the survey in the spring, and summer meetings between Associate Vice President for Financial Affairs Patricia Raczynski and Financial Affairs directors and Human Resources department representatives led to action plan development.

Raczynski assured her division it would focus on the topics of promotion, evaluation and training — items she knew could be immediately improved — and that she would continue to champion any positive changes regarding building safety and parking with UAB senior management.

Focus group summaries showed promotions covered a wide range of topics, including organizational structure, job requirements and the recruitment process. These issues are addressed frequently in what Raczynski refers to as infomercials — five- to seven-minute presentations on a particular topic prior to the monthly training classes.

“The information our employees needed was available,” Raczynski says. “We just needed to develop a process to relay the information.”

The first infomercial focused on training and educating staff. It concentrated on promotions and how an employee can enhance his or her ability to move up within the job structure of Financial Affairs. A second infomercial showed employees how to read the organizational chart to focus on target areas of interest for advancement.

“They were honest discussions with the staff about the things they need to do so we can help them reach their goals,” McMinn says. “We showed them how to find the minimum qualifications for jobs, how to go to Human Resources and see the grade ranges for jobs. It’s a way to try to help our employees better understand the UAB process, which is a vital part for employees of any organization this breadth and size.”

Addressing the job tiers within the division required a more intense action plan. After consulting with Human Relations and Compensation, new financial affairs associate titles were created to replace the previously existing financial assistant and financial associate titles. The changes also provided a new tier within the structure, meaning the division now has financial associates I, II and III, which provided another promotion track within the division.

Other job titles also were collapsed into the new financial affairs associate titles, including financial and specialist, acquisition specialist, payroll specialist and office services specialist III. The buyer position also was reclassified.

Positive feedback

The training classes have been taking place for the past eight months. Approximately 170 employees, have been well received. Directors have visited the training sessions and introduced themselves, and employees have networked with one another to learn more about other positions within the division and how they operate.

“The feedback has been positive,” McMinn says. “You’ve definitely seen more interaction among staff and between the management and the staff. There has been more communication. Maybe an employee doesn’t want it until they get frustrated to go to a manager. It’s opened a dialogue, and I think our employees now feel more informed of the role of Financial Affairs for the university and not just what their unit does. They see the overall big scope and purpose of the office.”

Allison

continued from page 1

Award, the UAB academic medical center’s most prestigious faculty award. It acknowledges the high regard in which he is held by his peers and reflects his contributions to the university and the community.

“I am incredibly honored to be given such remarkable and wonderful recognition by my peers,” Allison says. “It is especially meaningful to me because this was obviously put forward by my close colleagues within and outside the university. It recognizes scientific achievement, and it’s a recognition that people respect and care about you. That means a great deal to me.”

Allison will present a 30-minute lecture, “The Fire of Life,” beginning at 4 p.m., Monday, Oct. 10 in the Alys Stephens Center Strote Theater. “The Fire of Life” is the subtitle of the book An Introduction to Animal Genetics by Max Kleiber, an early pioneer in the field of genetics — a topic Allison plans to cover broadly in his lecture. The lecture is free and open to anyone on campus. President Carol Garrison will honor Allison at an invitation-only dinner next month in the UAB Woodward House.

To be considered for the Distinguished Faculty Lecturer Award, faculty must have made significant contributions in one of three areas: empirical research, research methodology and theory building or adaptation. Allison has achieved an international reputation in each of these areas. He has consistently generated new knowledge through his research endeavors throughout his career.

Allison has studied the causes, consequences, treatment and prevention of obesity since he began with his second post-doctoral fellowship in 1991 at Columbia University.

Donna Arnett, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Epidemiology, says the most striking part of Allison’s empirical research in obesity is the breadth and depth of his research activities.

“I know of no other scientist in the area of obesity that has conducted the full spectrum of translational research and emphasizes Dr. Allison’s capacity and ability to generate knowledge,” Arnett says.

Steven Blair, professor of exercise science, epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of South Carolina, has known Allison for more than 15 years. He marvels at the more than 400 papers Allison has published in peer-reviewed journals plus dozens of other publications, including books.

“David is not constrained by traditional views on a variety of scientific issues, but always is exploring the outer reaches of our knowledge,” Blair says. “He is one of the most creative scientists I know, and his work stimulates others to expand their horizons. He has had a broad influence across a wide range of scientific topics.”

Allison also is an internationally respected scientist in the area of statistical genetics. He has held at least four awards from the National Science Foundation and the NIH to conduct short courses in the areas of statistical genetics and genomics. His papers in research methodology have driven new methods for analyzing genetic data.

In addition to his own success, Allison promoted the careers of multiple faculty in the Section on Statistical Genetics who went on to obtain their own R01 research grant for methods development in statistical genetics.

In fact, colleagues say Allison goes out of his way to help fellow researchers and has provided opportunities for the UAB research community to engage with some of the top obesity researchers in the world.

His leadership has led to funding for junior faculty to conduct pilot studies, travel awards, external grant reviews, fellowships and development opportunities for students and faculty,” says Olivia Affuso, Ph.D., assistant professor in the School of Public Health. “Through the Section on Statistical Genetics, Dr. Allison has mentored numerous students and fellows, many of whom have gone on to become top scholars in their own right.”

“Perhaps his most enduring legacy will be the success of his mentees,” says George Howard, Dr.P.H., chair of Biostatistics. “David has been completely devoted to help young students, post-doctoral fellows and faculty grow into independent scientists. These efforts have had striking success as the number of assistant and associate professors under his mentorship with R01 and other extramural funding continues to grow.”

Allison also admire Allison for his pursuit of good science even when it has made him unpopular.

“I’ve been lambasted at times because I say things that fly in the face of certain conventional beliefs about obesity,” Allison says. “There’s this common public health mantra now that we must get sidewalks in neighborhoods, build parks, tax some foods and so forth. I often ask where’s the evidence that this helps obesity? And when you look at the evidence, it’s often not compelling or it’s non-existent. In other cases, the evidence tends to show these things don’t have clear and consistent effects. I’ve been hit hard for saying that.”

Allison is thankful UAB and his colleagues have supported him. Louis Bridges, M.D., Ph.D., director of the Division of Clinical Immunology and Rheumatology, says Allison has an unwavering commitment to standards of excellence in all of his endeavors.

“Dr. Allison is of exemplary character, which reflects greatly honor upon UAB. Bridges says. “He is a true scientist, a gifted thinker, and he has a remarkable degree of intellectual curiosity. He holds all his colleagues accountable for the highest degree of scientific, personal and academic integrity, and he demands no less of himself. I think of no better way to honor Dr. Allison for his remarkable lifetime of achievements than to name him the UAB Distinguished Faculty Lecturer.”
Littleton is at her best when the students need her most

Deborah Littleton personifies the ideal of a dedicated employee, her colleagues say. Littleton, academic advisor in the College of Arts & Sciences, has been a source of timely and accurate information for students and faculty for almost two decades advising upper-division undergraduates first in the School of Social & Behavioral Sciences and now in the College.

Colleagues describe Littleton as a knowledgeable and punctual professional, who is innovative in handling problems and a caring advisor of her students — attributes that make her September’s UAB Employee of the Month.

“She is at her best when we need her most,” says Wendy Gunther-Canada, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Government. “The real measure of Deborah’s success often is not noticeable to either faculty or students. I have worked with her on sensitive student issues to reach a fair and positive outcome in full compliance with UAB student and faculty policies and procedures. She has impressed me with her ability to work diligently to resolve matters concerning curriculum, scheduling and performance.”

Littleton approaches these tasks with an expansive understanding of the concerns of UAB students and the priorities of the administration. She brings a positive spirit and a unique empathy to her interactions with each student advisee.

That was especially evident in the aftermath of April’s devastating tornadoes. Littleton acted as a liaison between distressed students and faculty to ensure coursework was completed in time for graduation.

“I had quite a few students affected by the tornado,” she says. “A lot of them had my phone number in their cell phone, so I was an easy contact. I did reach out to some of the professors concerning students to make sure they knew what was going on. I followed up to ensure things were working out and students were able to get their assignments in on time or take their finals a little bit later.”

“Deborah is an exceptional academic advisor,” says Catherine Daniiliot, Ph.D., associate dean for Academic Affairs. “She helps students readily, helps them stay on track and graduate, is a quick problem-solver and cares profoundly about each student reaching out to her. We are fortunate and grateful for the many ways she connects with our College of Arts and Sciences students and helps them get to where they want to be or need to be.”

To navigate the waters of graduation for students and faculty, Littleton has to stay current on all of the current catalog language. Her comprehensive knowledge of the undergraduate curriculum is grounded in her own first-hand experience of UAB as a respected, active alumna.

Littleton has generously guided students in their academic progress on campus and energetically worked to ensure retention and graduation. Of course, she has to help her students and faculty through crisis.

Nikolaos Zahariadis, Ph.D., professor of government, has had to deal with cases of students having to fulfill the foreign language requirement of their international studies major with languages that are not offered at UAB.

“I was able to work through this problem by discussing various creative solutions with Ms. Littleton that would satisfy UAB rules but still allow me to verify language proficiency,” Zahariadis says. “She also put me in touch with others I did not know who helped me solve some of these problems. I appreciate her willingness to help me think outside the box to solve difficult administrative problems.”

Commitment to students

Littleton advises juniors and seniors and began teaching freshman courses in 2010. She’s teaching two freshman-experience courses this fall.

“I like interacting with the freshmen and see where they’re coming from and how they’re transitioning from high school to college,” Littleton says. “It’s also great to be with students as juniors and seniors and see their successes. It’s really special to be a part of that and see them reach their goals and move on to graduate school or the workforce.”

Colleagues say Littleton never lets the demanding nature of her job get in the way of her commitment to students. Renato Corbetta, Ph.D., professor of government, says Littleton does an incredible job guiding political science and international studies majors through the maze of graduation requirements.

“Many of our students come from non-traditional backgrounds, and it is often challenging for them to balance academic goals and non-academic needs,” Corbetta says. “Ms. Littleton goes above and beyond her call of duty in offering them individual attention and getting to know them personally. Students talk to me about Ms. Littleton in the highest terms possible, always mentioning her knowledge, expertise, care and empathy.”

Littleton also leads recruitment efforts for the social sciences, including UAB Transfer Day and UAB Day for prospective students. Holly Brasher, Ph.D., associate professor of government, says these programs are extremely well run and well organized.

“Deborah’s leadership for these events is an important contribution to UAB’s recruitment efforts.” Brasher adds, “She is a welcoming leadership presence for students and parents, and she communicates effectively with faculty to inform them about prospective students and the details of the events so faculty are well prepared and the departments can maximize the usefulness of the recruitment events.”

Littleton says she is grateful for the honor bestowed upon her by her colleagues, especially considering she is just doing what she loves to do each day.

“It’s definitely very humbling to be thought of as a positive light by your colleagues,” Littleton says. “I do love my job. I love the people and departments I work with. My students are great. Every day is different — and new and exciting. I definitely like that.”

Know someone who should be Employee of the Month? If you know of a great employee who exemplifies what is best about UAB and would like to nominate them for Employee of the Month, send at least three letters of nomination using examples and as much detail as possible to bswood@uab.edu. Hard copy nominations can be submitted through campus mail at Employee of the Month Committee, AB 900, UAB.

Alys Stephens Center announces next independent film

UAB’s Alys Stephens Center and the Sidewalk Film Festival have partnered this season to present a series of independent films designed to get audiences up close and personal with the country’s hottest new directors.

On Oct. 13, see “Louder Than a Bomb,” a film that chronicles the stereotype-confounding stories of four teams as they prepare for and compete in the world’s largest youth poetry slam. The series continues Nov. 17 with “Welcome to Shelbyville,” the story of a town grappling with its segregated past while at the same time navigating the arrival of Latino immigrants and newer Somali refugees who have come to work in the local chicken plant.

“The Toe Tactic,” set for Feb. 9, 2012, brings to life a world of reality and imagination through the filmmaker’s hand-drawn animation and live action as newcomer Lily Rabe interacts with animated forms, with an innovative score by Yo La Tengo.

All movies will begin at 7 p.m. in the Alys Stephens Center. Tickets are $10 and $8 for students. Call 975-2787 or visit www.AlysStephens.org. The series is through Southern Circuit, which brings some of the best independent filmmakers and their films from around the country and the world to communities in the South. See the film, then meet the filmmakers and discuss the work. The series transforms the experience of watching independent films from a solitary to shared one, and enables the audience to get into the mind of the film’s creators.

Oct. 3, 2011 UAB Reporter 5
Get prepped for the first UAB Blazer Fun Run

B ring your families and strollers to walk, jog or run in the first Blazer Fun Run at 9 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 12. UAB faculty, staff, students and their families can follow the two-mile course through UAB and Railroad Park before winding back to the Campus Green. The cost is $10 per person if you register before Oct. 14 and $20 afterward. Kids age 12 and under participate for free.

Details: The first UAB Fun Run is opportunity for faculty, staff, students and their families to engage in healthy activities and learn more about the services available to them at UAB. A new UAB Wellness Guide will be distributed the day of the event.

Website: www.uab.edu/wellness

CONTINUED from page 1

is not a decision you can make on your own. We’ve had some family members that have jumped into the Bear the Pack program and a few get involved with EatRight.

“We want to build a bridge between the experts, resources and programs we have at UAB to our employees who want to be involved, need the help and want to take those steps,” she says. The Wellness Program was born of the Wellness Committee, which was started by a group of employees interested in promoting healthy habits. The new Wellness Program is a benefit provided to all employees and their families. UAB’s decision to dedicate one person to develop and oversee the program is a significant step, says Will Ferniany, Ph.D., chief executive officer of the UAB Health System.

“Lauren’s position as head of our wellness programs is an important milestone for UAB. Nothing is more important to invest in than the faculty and staff who work here. UAB leadership is committed to having a healthy workplace and healthy faculty and staff.” —Will Ferniany, UAB Health System CEO

What: UAB Fun Run Where: Saturday, Nov. 12, 9 a.m.

Cost: $10 per person if registered before Oct. 14; $20 per person afterward. Free for kids 12 and under.

Among the programs involved in Lifestyle Solutions is EatRight, which now provides access to its programs for 12 weeks at a cost of $125. If you choose to join the Hospital Health Club during that 12-week period, too, the total cost for access to both is $175. Another advantage to employees is the 12-free counseling sessions provided each year through the Employee Assistance Program. These free, personal counseling sessions are confidential and focus on individual, couples or family issues. The free Beat the Pack program has been well attended by employees and family members. It will return in November and continue every other month with one lunch-hour class a week for six weeks.

Another focus is helping employees manage their chronic conditions — diabetes, hypertension and other health maladies that aren’t going to go away. The goal, Whitt says, is to help employees make good decisions and find the right treatment options in many cases.
nabell happy she was propelled into internal medicine

In scientific research, some of the greatest discoveries are unintentional. For Lisle Nabell, M.D., associate professor of medicine and medical director of Hematology and Oncology for The Kirklin Clinic, her entire clinical career came as a surprise. Her interests throughout medical school had focused on pathology, but a resident during her hematology/oncology rotation changed Nabell’s mind in an unexpected way.

“She was very condescending,” Nabell says. “She was the one calling the shots. When I watched her interact with patients, I kept thinking, ‘I could do so much better than that.’ That experience seriously galvanized me.”

The resident’s example “propelled me into internal medicine,” Nabell says. And “the marriage of research and cutting-edge changes,” she says, led her to hematology and oncology. Nabell is a five-time winner of the Coobs/Rutsky Award for Clinical Excellence and seven-time Department of Medicine Outstanding Division Teacher.

She spent much of her fellowship at UAB in the lab of the late Jeffrey Kudlow, M.D., before the famous “three As” of the practicing physician led to more time at the patient bedside, she says: “I was able, available and affable.” A new mother and a busy clinician, Nabell said she “had to reinvent myself.”

Unexpected interest

Nabell’s interest in head and neck cancer also was unexpected — she was “thrust into it,” she says, “because the doctor who was doing it previously left.” However, “it’s really been a nice niche,” she says. “There are a lot of collaborative efforts ongoing between surgery and radiation oncology, which I like. “It’s a really interesting field, and not just from a standpoint of pathogenesis,” Nabell adds. “The patient population runs the gamut” from lifetime smokers with throat cancer to nonsmokers and nondrinkers whose cancer is seemingly inexplicable.

“Pain management is a prominent need in this area, as it is outcomes analysis, looking at late effects of surgery, radiation or chemotherapy,” she says. Nabell is intrigued by the complexity of the head and neck — “speech, taste, articulation, vocalization, swallowing — it’s all going on in that area.” And, she says, it’s been a fruitful area for investigation, working with the surgical group to develop new trials.

Nabell’s other roles at UAB take her away from the hospital. As fellowship director for hematology/oncology and The Kirklin Clinic’s medical director for hematology/oncology clinical activities, Nabell spends more time behind a desk than at the patient’s bedside. Maintaining program accreditation, seeing to reimbursement issues, scheduling chemotherapy and her other duties are as much an exercise in time and resource management as anything else, she says. But to be perfectly honest, she says, “I have a sneaky love affair with administration. I like to make things better, see them be better and know I had a hand in it. It’s my dirty secret.”

Nabell’s other secret is that her fellows aren’t the only ones learning from their time in the hospital. “Part of being the fellowship director and being so intimately involved is that you’re constantly challenged by the fellows and the residency team,” she says. “Invariably, I come away knowing a little bit more because I had to go look something up so I could explain it better, or I get challenged and have to look it up to explain my position. I always come away a little better educated than when I started.”

On the trail

Most of Nabell’s time outside the office is devoted to her family — husband Bob, a chemist at the Southern Research Institute, daughters Victoria and Kathryn and son Luke. They enjoy hiking and recent trips to Olympic National Park in Washington and Glacier National Park in Montana. Or more accurately, she enjoys it, and “the kids whine a lot,” she says jokingly.

“I’m eternally grateful for having children,” she says. “They really rounded me out.” She learned to play the violin along with her children and continues to take lessons, although “my children have easily surpassed me,” she says. “It’s one of those things you’re not looking for that improves the quality of conversation at the dinner table.”

That dinner table is usually packed. A self-confessed “foodies,” Nabell enjoys cooking and grows a veritable forest of basil to support her pesto habit. “My idea of a good meal is probably a roast pork loin with a risotto or a pesto and pan-seared vegetables.” And, she says, red wine — another field she stumbled into unintentionally.

She recalls leading recruiting dinners as intern director of the division. “When it came time to order wine, the waterer would sort of halfway turn to me, and neither of us was sure what to do.” She became “much more aggressive,” she says, about moving beyond her casual enjoyment of wine to develop a “working vocabulary.”

“It’s not a love affair, mind you, but I expanded my horizons,” she says. “I was sort of forced into it.”

Low blood pressure may lead to higher risk of heart failure

Older adults who have low diastolic blood pressure are at increased risk for developing new-onset heart failure, according to new UAB research published Sept. 26 in Hypertension, a journal of the American Heart Association.

Diastolic blood pressure measures the pressure in your blood vessels between heartbeats, when your heart is resting. It is represented by the bottom number in a blood pressure reading. Systolic blood pressure measures the amount of pressure that blood exerts on vessels while the heart is beating. It is represented by the top number in a blood pressure reading.

The study coined and defined the term “isolated diastolic hypertension,” which occurs when the diastolic blood pressure is low (less than 60 mm Hg) and the systolic blood pressure is not low (above 100 mm Hg). This is similar to a condition called isolated systolic hypertension, when the systolic blood pressure alone is elevated (above 140 mm Hg) but the diastolic blood pressure is not elevated (less than 90 mm Hg). This condition is common in older adults and also is a risk factor for heart failure.

“Our findings showed that older adults who have low diastolic blood pressure but not low systolic blood pressure were more likely to develop new-onset heart failure than those with higher levels of diastolic blood pressure,” said Ali Ahmed, M.D., professor of medicine in the Division of Gerontology, Geriatrics and Palliative Care, director of the UAB geriatric heart-failure clinic and the study’s senior investigator.

“Older adults with low diastolic blood pressure also had higher risk of death.” Ahmed and colleagues say that isolated diastolic hypertension also can occur in patients with high systolic pressure who are controlling their high blood pressure with medications.

“This may become a dilemma for physicians when treating these patients,” said Jason Guichard, M.D., Ph.D., a cardiology fellow and the lead author of the study. “It may be difficult to find the appropriate dosage of anti-hypertensive medications that will reduce the systolic blood pressure to normal levels to below 140 mm Hg, without reducing diastolic blood pressure to below 60 mm Hg.”

“Unfortunately, when the diastolic blood pressure is low in the absence of any anti-hypertensive medications, there is little that can be done,” said Ahmed, who is also a senior scientist at the UAB Center for Aging.

“Weather addressing other risk factors for heart failure would reduce the risk of heart failure in these individuals remains unclear.”

Ahmed and Guichard say additional research is necessary to establish guidelines for optimal diastolic blood pressure parameters for older adults, particularly for those using anti-hypertensive medications.
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