It was June 2018 at the University College of London. Professor Karl Friston was part of a neuroscience presentation and Avery Van De Water was in the audience, “It was time for questions, so I raised my hand. I wasn’t quite sure who he was,” said the CYOS 2019 Award recipient. She later learned that Dr. Friston is one of the leading international authorities on brain imaging and had developed Statistical Parametric Mapping, the primary software for analyzing brain imaging results. “I eventually worked with him that summer and was the only undergraduate in a building of doctoral-level students and faculty,” said Avery.

A Gilman International Scholarship enabled her to study in London, fueling her deep desire to learn more about brain neuroscience. Simultaneously, Avery balanced the rigors of brain research by working long distance with UNH Director of National Fellowships Jeanne Sokolowski to prepare a competitive Fulbright Scholarship application. It was a full bore learning adventure.

Avery’s path to academic success and professional promise has not been linear or smooth. The youngest of four children, she admits to being shy and somewhat withdrawn during her time at Bow (N.H.) High School. Medical school was her dream as she applied to colleges. “I really wanted Smith College,” Avery said. “My sister went there, and they have a great neuroscience program. I was denied at Stanford, and initially put on the wait list at Smith,” she said. So, Avery attended UNH Orientation as insurance, not excited and considering it just a safety school. Then came the Smith denial email. Avery was deflated and frustrated.

Although Avery struggled at UNH initially, her resident assistant (RA) saw a spark and encouraged her to submit an RA application. She was selected and worked as a sophomore under Residence Hall Director Tara Schoenherr. “Despite Avery’s skills and work ethic, she struggled initially in important areas of the RA job,” said Tara. With struggles in school as well, Avery felt her medical school dream evaporating. After a soul-searching winter break, she was determined to turn things around. She worked closely with Tara on her leadership and facilitation skills, began meeting with TRIO Counselor Randy Schroeder, doubled down on her academic efforts, and found ways to rebuild a shaken confidence. Another major evolution was a sense of her sexual identity; she found support in this through involvement in social justice organizations. “Coming out as a gay woman was a final step in really embracing who I was here,” Avery said. “UNH gave me time to develop in ways that I did not think that I would.”

Kindness has always been a center for me. That is where a lot of my strength comes from.

During this time, Avery’s grandfather facilitated a connection with Dr. Konstantina Stankovic, a highly regarded neurosurgeon and auditory neuroscientist at Harvard University. Avery explored serving as an unpaid assistant in her lab to gain research experience. She needed paid work as well and was initially daunted by summer living in Boston. However, excited by the challenges of a novel urban adventure, she threw herself into it, working long hours as a cocktail waitress in addition to her full-time research role. “I worked so hard just to exist in Boston,” Avery said, “but this was a huge turning point for me and a transformative experience!”

Avery’s trajectory soared after that summer. She began a second year as an RA and started work in Professor Don Robin’s brain imaging and speech neuroscience lab. Her grades improved dramatically, she continued her extracurricular involvements and revised her professional goals with enthusiasm. Currently, she is wrapping up an honors thesis focusing on the neural substrates of speech apraxia and will participate this spring in the UNH Undergraduate Research Conference. In May 2019, Avery will graduate with her degree in neuroscience and behavior with experience in four different neuroscience labs, national and international academic travel and extensive skills in science and collaborative teamwork.

Avery plans on pursuing a doctoral program after more research experience in a psychiatry-oriented setting helping those struggling with mental health. These future professional plans are greatly influenced by her personal history of growing up with siblings facing numerous mental health and neurological challenges. Avery sees promise in her future research. “Neuroimaging is such a useful tool developing at a rapid pace. I have hopes that it can be used to assist in mental health diagnoses and treatment strategies.”

In reflection on her initial hesitancy to attend her state university, she admits that, “UNH has helped me to find very good mentors. I believe in them so much, I trust them, it is really so meaningful.”