When choosing a major, medicine was something that Michael Newell ’20 decided on very early. They had participated in a high school internship, job-shadowing physical therapists, occupational therapists, nurses and doctors. They realized they enjoyed the patient-care aspect of the nursing profession. Michael says helping people is their main passion in life. Their goal is to assist people in a holistic manner, healing not only the physical ailments, but addressing emotional and psychological components of health as well.

This desire to help people (along with taking UNH’s ’Making Babies’ nursing course about childbirth) led Michael to pick up a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. They say the course Gender, Power, and Privilege opened their mind more than any other. “Until then, I was just taking medical courses. This course taught me the more humanistic side of thinking and helping people and how to apply this to nursing,” says Michael.

Michael was able to combine their two academic passions (nursing and women's and gender studies) by bringing the Safe Zones program, an educational program to raise awareness of the LGBTQIAP+ community, to the UNH nursing program. Michael worked with facilitators to focus discussion panels on how to support this population in the healthcare field specifically. This new programming, Michael hopes, will improve students’ competence and confidence in providing inclusive care and validation of future patients in their identities.

When asked why they came to UNH, Michael’s answer was quite simple: finances (Michael is a recipient of the prestigious Hamel Scholarship, as well as the Bill and Becky McGee Scholarship). However, Michael emphasizes that the reason they stayed at the University is far more important. “I was able to find a small community within the larger UNH community.”

As an Asian-American it was important to them to find a community where they felt a sense of belonging at UNH. This community started for Michael before their first day of classes in CONNECT, a first-year bridge program focused on helping multicultural, first-generation and low-income students make the transition into UNH. CONNECT opened many more doors for Michael here at UNH: they became a mentor in the program, became involved in the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs, joined Alliance (the primary LGBTQIAP+ student group at UNH), served as a program coordinator for the United Asian Coalition, and worked as the business manager for the Diversity Support Coalition.

Michael proudly talks about these positions because they allowed them to have an impact on the community they care so deeply about, but also because of the leadership roles they have provided.

The support that Michael has received over the last four years goes beyond their peers in student organizations, CONNECT, or the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. Michael references Erica Vazza (their first-year hall director), Andres Mejia (former CONNECT director), and Kristen Butterfield (program coordinator in University Honors) as some of the most influential people during their time here at UNH. “Erica, Andres and Kristen supported me and believed in me. They’ve given me the confidence to do what I have done at UNH, including the leadership roles. They have always been there for me,” Michael says.

These professionals assisted Michael in their transition to UNH, but also in guiding Michael in their path to finding themselves and creating their own story — a path that Michael believes never ends. Michael says being adopted from China at a very young age has had a profound effect on their identity and life experiences. Their first year at UNH was about self-discovery and led them to come out as transgender in their sophomore year, and just this last semester, to legally change their name.

“My advice to younger students is to get involved; that’s how I found my community. For anyone who feels they are having struggles, either academically or otherwise, by getting involved you will have a support system to get you through tougher times.”