Stephanie Fulton's thoughtful decision to become a Family Nurse Practitioner evolved over years of caring for medical patients in various healthcare settings. For someone only 21 years old her patient care experience, acquired while also being a full-time UNH student, is extensive, broad, and based in multiple organizations. She became a Licensed Nurse Practitioner (LNHP) during her senior year of high school and has worked extensively during summer months and UNH breaks with multiple nursing jobs. Her work with a range of patients at a northern NH visiting nursing association, at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, and at a NH medical home has all given her a full sense of how various organizations provide patient care and administer critical services.

"Working at Dartmouth Hitchcock not only broadened my understanding of the dynamics of inpatient healthcare, but also provided an opportunity to learn about specialty areas such as intensive care, hematology, oncology, pediatric, and many others," shared Stephanie. "I learned more skills in my nursing assistant role and started to see the different players in the patient care team and learn how important each person is to the quality care of patients."

In her other role as a University senior poised to graduate in May 2017, Stephanie's academic performance has been outstanding. It is atypical for someone on a Pre-Medical track to major in Human Development & Family Studies, but Stephanie wanted the breadth that the major provided while also completing necessary science pre-requisites for medical school or an allied health graduate program. Given her success and involvement here it is surprising to hear that UNH was not her first choice. "I started out at Providence College. It seemed far enough away and so different from growing up. It felt like what I needed at the time; but I quickly felt out of place coming from my lower social class background," Stephanie explained. "I filled out my transfer application to UNH two weeks after starting there!" Once at UNH she was positively overwhelmed with opportunities, and had a full sense that she would inevitably find her place.

However, Stephanie's path to becoming her class valedictorian at Newport (NH) High School and a summa cum laude UNH student was not smoothly paved. Her early home environment included family members with alcohol and drug dependencies, untreated mental illnesses, and a father revolving through stints in prison. "This left me with one of the most important decisions I’ve had to make,“ recounted Stephanie. "I could either let myself fall into a life like my family’s, or do everything in my power to move towards a better life. I have realized that with each obstacle came strength, resiliency, and an even stronger desire towards the life I have always wanted. Because my parents were not able to adequately fulfill my needs, I am aware of what it means to be a provider."

In April 2015, Stephanie encountered her biggest supporter, cheerleader, and mentor at UNH through TRIO-Student Support Services. "Randy Schroeder from TRIO came to my Healthcare Professions class,“ she relayed. "While I was sure that a health profession was in my future, I needed further definition of my professional direction. We met soon after that to discuss medical doctor vs. physician assistant options and try to figure it all out. Randy helped me to piece every single part together." Over two years of many thoughtful discussions, research, and much reflection, Stephanie decided that becoming a Family Nurse Practitioner was her ideal direction. As of this writing she has applied to four highly competitive professional programs and has been accepted to three.

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A significant opportunity that Stephanie pursued in May 2016 was a week-long experience in rural Honduras with Global Brigades. Students and medical professionals volunteered to set up a make-shift health clinic serving more than 700 Hondurans. Stephanie triaged patients, taught basic hygiene, distributed medications, and provided basic health services. She described how, "Global Brigades takes a holistic approach. A medical team goes in and eventually teams in engineering, public health, water do the same. The primary goal is getting the town to be self-sustaining. The Hondurans trip solidified my purpose to work in healthcare. She will be traveling and co-leading another trip again in May 2017 after her UNH graduation. Stephanie noted that, “Everybody was so appreciative of some of the most basic needs that we provided. It was hard to come back to the US after this experience knowing that we take so much for granted.”

Stephanie has also devoted her spare time to participating in various volunteer events through Golden Key International Honor Society, Alpha Epsilon Delta Pre-Health Professional Honor Society (AED), Project Sunshine and Relay for Life. From raising money to fight cancer, to making craft kits for children in hospitals, to putting together care-packages for the homeless, Stephanie has really devoted herself to giving back to those in need and solidifying her purpose on this earth; “to make a difference in as many lives as I can” she explained.

In reflecting upon her personal story with just months before her UNH graduation, Stephanie paused, then concluded that, “My will to pull myself out of the chaos and channel it all towards making a positive difference in this world grows exponentially every day. Without the instability and adversity of my background, I would not have the relentless desire to devote myself to being a supportive, compassionate healer and Nurse Practitioner.”