

The Vulcan Letter

Voice of the MSTP at the University of Alabama at Birmingham

Fall 2009



CHOOSING WHERE TO LIVE IN BIRMINGHAM

Asher J Albertson

Birmingham is a great place to live. The cost of living is very low and there are a variety of unique neighborhoods from which to choose. Each neighborhood has a distinct flavor, and you will find MSTP students scattered throughout each. Taking time to consider where you will live in Birmingham is crucial as MSTP programs are not renowned for their short length.

One of the most popular places for students to live is the Highland Park neighborhood. Highland Park is known for its young, “hip” attitude. It’s impossible to walk through the neighborhood without seeing young professionals jogging, walking their dogs, or listening to bands you’ve never heard. The rent is fairly cheap and several students have purchased condos in the area. It is about a 20 minute walk from school and a ten minute walk from Birmingham’s Five Points South entertainment district. The neighborhood contains several fantastic restaurants and bars as well as a grocery store. Highland also hosts several popular events each year. These include the summer symphony series in which the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra plays music in the park as well as “Do Dah Day” in which Birmingham dog owners dress their dogs up and walk them in an enormous parade, all while pretending that nothing weird is happening. Nicholas Reish, a fifth year MSTP student, mentioned how much he enjoys the “safety and location” of the neighborhood, while

also warning that it is definitely “not the quietist.”

The second most popular place for students to live is on the Southside. This is definitely the cheapest neighborhood in Birmingham. It is entirely possible to rent enormous apartments or even houses for 400-800 dollars per month leaving the rest of your salary for use in Five Points. That said, the majority of the living units are of older construction, so be prepared to sacrifice a little luxury for the low rent. The neighborhood is a ten minute walk from UAB and the Five Point’s district. Southside is definitely not quiet and you’ll frequently hear your neighbors partying all night. While relatively safe, there are isolated incidents of property theft in this neighborhood, so living there requires normal common sense. Matt Rutherford, a fourth year MSTP student, enjoys the Southside because of its “low rent and proximity to Fat Sam’s sandwich shop.”

Several students have chosen to live in the downtown area. This area is slightly more expensive, but offers a more “city-living experience.” There are many buildings which have been converted into lofts available for rent or purchase, as well as some newly constructed condos. It is about ten minutes from UAB and Five Points by car, although biking back and forth is also possible. Downtown features a variety of unique restaurants and bars and is also the location of several events

such as Birmingham’s Art Walk or the Sidewalk film festival.

Finally, many students, especially those with families, choose to live in one of Birmingham’s many outlying suburbs. These neighborhoods offer a quieter lifestyle typical of suburban life. The housing is usually more expensive, but is often much newer and of higher quality. Furthermore, most of the suburbs such as Mountain Brook, Vestavia, or Fultondale are supremely safe with quiet neighborhoods, good schools, and only mildly pretentious neighbors. These are also great places to look if one is interested in purchasing a house. The drawback is the distance from UAB, usually a twenty minute drive with good traffic, and the separation from many of the exciting things happening in Birmingham. Juan Calix, a fourth year MSTP, enjoys living in Fultondale because of its fast growth and proximity to stores such as Best Buy and Target.

Living in Birmingham is an enjoyable experience as unlike many other cities, there is less money and time encumbered with renting/owning your dwelling and commuting. Anyone entering the MSTP at UAB should talk to as many current students as possible about any of the living areas mentioned above. This will help one find the best possible match for their personality. It is also a great way to get in touch with reliable landlords and become aware of many of the lesser advertised deals.

The second Arts in Medicine lecture brought a clinician turned artist to Spain Auditorium to discuss his views on the intersection of art and medicine. Dr. Don Stewart graduated from medical school at UAB in 1985 and went on to do a year of surgery at the Mayo Clinic. Realizing the lifestyle of surgical resident was at odds with his love of art and writing, Dr. Stewart chose to pursue his interests in graphic art, writing, and creative consulting through his company DS Art (www.dsart.com). Dr. Stewart's art work involves composite imagery, where he painstakingly draws highly detailed images of items to create an image of a larger object, where each ballpoint pen rendered building block strives to somehow relate to the larger theme. Although the lecture was a cross between a standup comedy act and an art show, Dr. Stewart strove to impress upon the audience the importance of understanding the social history of a patient and how the art of reading a person is critical to being a good clinician. Dr. Stewart can be asked questions about his views on art and medicine or commissioned for a custom piece by email at don@dsart.com.



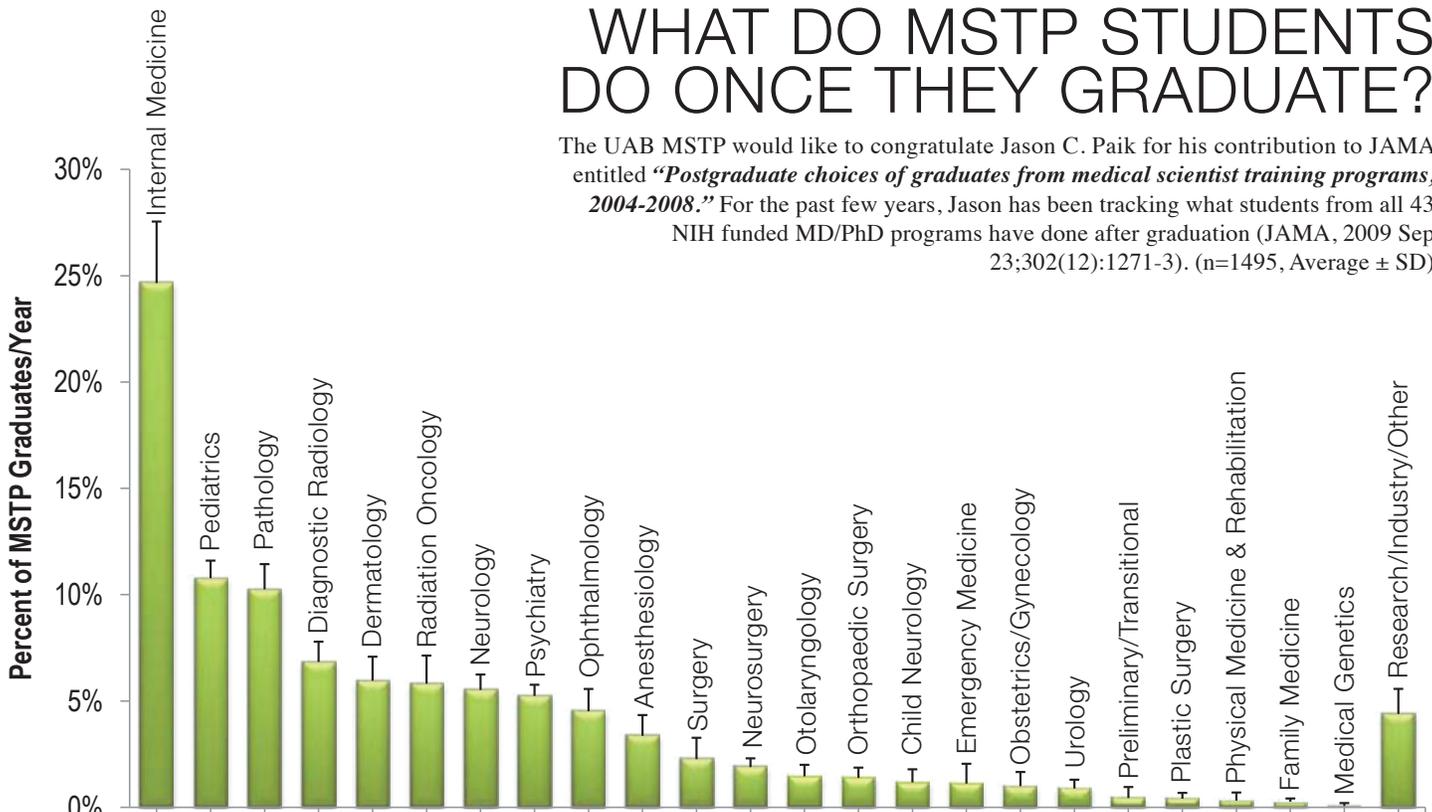
“Cancer” is a simple illustration of hope and tenacity, utilizing both ancient and modern symbols to describe the conundrum of this often devastating disease process, and the ongoing search for a cure.

Hippocrates called malignant tumors Karkinos, Greek for crab or crayfish. The term describes an apparent similarity of these many-legged aquatic creatures to certain tumors with swollen veins, or the cut surface of a malignant mass, having a hard round center surrounded by pointed projections. The Latin word for crab is Cancer.

This cancer consists of a Gordian knot, itself an ancient metaphor for an intractable problem. The knot is a tangle of ribbon, which today represents a bond of unity and support, and a badge of solidarity against a common challenge. The crab-shaped knot thus signifies both an extremely difficult puzzle to untangle, and the determination to arrive at a solution. Fortunately, one of the legs of the crab is slowly beginning to unravel, as we continue to make progress in cancer diagnosis and treatment.

WHAT DO MSTP STUDENTS DO ONCE THEY GRADUATE?

The UAB MSTP would like to congratulate Jason C. Paik for his contribution to JAMA entitled *“Postgraduate choices of graduates from medical scientist training programs, 2004-2008.”* For the past few years, Jason has been tracking what students from all 43 NIH funded MD/PhD programs have done after graduation (JAMA, 2009 Sep 23;302(12):1271-3). (n=1495, Average ± SD)



OLD AND NEW MENTORS

Sini E Nwaobi

Finding the right lab can be difficult for anyone. For MSTP students this search can be even more difficult based on time limitations, the need for clinical relevance, and the weight of expectations. Although there is a vibrant informal mentoring network between the students, here we present the first in a new series “Old and New Mentors,” in order to shine the spotlight on labs that have a track record for being MSTP friendly and also newer labs that have the potential to be a great home for wandering MSTP students.

Something Old (and Good) Focus on the Sontheimer Lab by Vishnu Cuddapah



Dr. Harald Sontheimer

Dr. Harald Sontheimer in the Department of Neurobiology has graduated many MSTP students and is currently mentoring three MSTP students, including myself. Dr. Sontheimer completed his PhD in cell biology and biophysics at The University of Heidelberg in 1989, and then moved to Yale University, where he completed his post-doctoral training in 1991. He stayed at Yale from 1991-1994 as an Assistant Professor, and was then recruited to UAB in 1994. As Dr. Sontheimer has trained many MSTP students through his career, I asked him if there is anything special about training MSTP students.

In Dr. Sontheimer’s experience, “training MD/PhDs is easy,” but the difficulty is helping them be successful later on in their career, especially during the transition from a fellowship to a career integrating both medicine and bench research. He

believes that MD/PhDs should finish their PhD training at the top of their game, because most will not be able to complete 4-5 years of post-doctoral training like their PhD counterparts. Therefore, MD/PhDs must develop their research, writing, and publication skills as much as possible during their graduate training, so that by the time the post-residency fellowship starts, trainees are prepared to be maximally productive in the lab and clinic, positioning themselves for a career in academia. Dr. Sontheimer recognizes the need to finish the MSTP as soon as possible; he has successfully graduated his MSTP students in < 4 years, without compromising the quality of their training. All of the MSTPs left the lab with at least 3 first author publications and were able to match with their first-choice of residency programs.

Science is Fun

The Sontheimer lab is currently home to six graduate students, including three MSTPs, three post-docs, and an undergraduate student. Dr. Sue Spiller, a pediatric neuro-oncologist at Children’s, and Dr. Brian Sims, a pediatric neonatologist also at Children’s, are affiliated with the lab and share some space. Stacey Watkins (GS-2), the newest member of the group, describes the lab as having “no single personality – everybody brings something to the table.” She was attracted to the lab because of the emphasis placed on having a clinical perspective while doing basic science. Stacey knew she wanted to join the lab early in her rotation; although her “straightforward” summer project turned out to be challenging, she still wanted to come to work next day because everybody was willing to help, and Dr. Sontheimer was available as often as she wanted to meet him.

MSTP students may be attracted to the lab

because Dr. Sontheimer likes to give his students autonomy but is always available to provide guidance. Students are not handed a grant and told to “do Aim 1.” Instead his approach is to say, “This is the big question. See how you can make a dent in it.” In Dr. Sontheimer’s experience, MSTPs thrive when given this conceptual guidance versus dictating what experiments to do on a weekly basis.

Beyond experiments, the lab enjoys spending time together. Most of the members have lunch together every day. We also thoroughly enjoy the daily oCBT (official Coffee Break Time) at 2:30 during which we discuss random topics, ranging from landing on Mars to metabolism rates of The Biggest Loser contestants, and sip coffee made from Italian beans ground in a Swiss espresso machine. Yeah, the coffee really is that good. Many lab members love cooking and baking, so potlucks and birthdays cakes are a routinely enjoyed. The Sontheimer Lab also celebrates the German tradition of Betriebsausflug, which is a basically a work outing. This past year, we went to Oak Mountain and spent the day eating and eating.

Beyond the UAB MSTP

Over the past 15 years, 6 MSTP students have graduated from Dr. Sontheimer’s lab. Two recent graduates include Nola Jean Ernest and Christa Habela (MS-4). Nola Jean began a residency in child neurology this summer at Vanderbilt. Christa will be matching next year and also hopes to practice child neurology. Neurology is a very common choice for graduates from the lab; in fact, 5/5 have matched in neurology, 4 in child neurology. Most graduates have stayed in academic medicine or are still training: Nicole Ullrich, defended in 1996, is currently Director of Neuro-oncology at Children’s Hospital, Boston. Chris

OLD AND NEW MENTORS CONT'D...

Ransom, defended in 2001, is a neurologist doing a fellowship in epilepsy at Yale University.

The track record of MSTPs excelling after graduation has attracted many students to the lab, including Avinash Honasoge (GS-1), who recently finished his summer rotation and decided to join the lab after finishing his Step 1. Avinash appreciates having constant access to experienced post-docs and the ability to practice science with a strong clinical relevance. Coupled with the fact that “Harry drives a highway-legal electric scooter,” he has found the lab to be a great match.

Something New (and Nice) Focus on the Randolph Lab by Sini E Nwaobi



Dr. David Randolph

obtained his PhD in the lab of Dr. David Chaplin, who is now chair of Microbiology at UAB. Randolph, who studied T cell biology at Wash U, went on to complete his residency in pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco. He followed this up with a 3 year fellowship at Stanford in neonatal intensive care and continued his research in developmental immunology.

UAB and the Randolph Lab

Randolph chose to come to UAB in part

because it is one of 15 academic institutions that make up the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development’s Neonatal Research Network.

This NIH supported network collaboratively conducts some of the world’s largest multi-center clinical trials and observational studies in a broad area of neonatal medicine. Randolph’s research focuses on neonatal T cell function, specifically how and when neonatal lymphocytes gain adult function. Ultimately, his lab is interested in the unique properties of neonatal T cells and their potential role in the increased susceptibility of neonates to infections that are not commonly fatal to adults, but carry high morbidity in neonates. With infection being one of the leading causes of morbidity in high risk and preterm neonates, this research offers promising clinical rewards with continued exploration and future discoveries. For MSTP students who want an area of research that is clinically relevant, Randolph’s lab offers basic science that is not only challenging and exciting, but clinically significant.

Unique Perspective

As a practicing physician, Randolph provides a unique perspective as a mentor for MSTPs. Few PI’s internalize the time commitments, stressors, and distinctive challenges of a physician-scientist. He readily admits to his work being extremely time intensive. And with some sorrow, Randolph mentions the difficulty of feeling that he is short-changing his family with time. “In theory it is a 25/75 split between clinic and research, but in reality it’s more like 80/90,” he comments, “and everything seems like it’s happening all at once.” Randolph spends 2 months of pure clinical service and 4 to 5 nights in the hospital every month. During this time, he fluctu-

ates between Children’s Hospital and UAB where he handles mainly high risk deliveries. While he admits to still searching to strike a healthy balance, he enjoys his time in both arenas. “The lab requires a different skill set – more creative. And there is a longer time horizon with research, e.g. an unsuccessful or successful delivery versus a long-term research goal or cure.” Randolph notes that he takes pleasure in the break from the sometimes routine clinical care and that it provides an outlet that he feels strongly connected to. Additionally, he benefits from “a different and deeper understanding of medicine as compared to other MDs in thinking of the disease process.”

Advantages of Being New

Randolph feels that his new lab offers several advantages for any student that would choose to rotate or complete a thesis in his lab. Anyone who comes here is going to get a lot of in-depth and innovative T cell biology. And unlike larger labs, he is very involved in the daily proceedings and science of the lab. “My door is always open. I’m at the bench myself at least once a day every week. And I meet with everyone in the lab once a week.” The Randolph lab offers a creative and flexible environment where students get a lot of personal attention. “I am available for my students, post-docs, and technicians.” Emily Blosser, a GS1 in Randolph’s lab enjoys the lab being at its beginning. She comments, “The lab is new, so many of the projects are still in their infancy. There are lots of directions to go. You don’t get that everywhere.”



The **UAB Center for Clinical and Translational Science (CCTS)** is a National Center for Research Resources (NCRR)-sponsored Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA). CTSA institutions work collaboratively to improve human health through transformation of the institutional research infrastructure to enhance the efficiency and quality of clinical and translational research.

The CCTS aims to transform UAB's research infrastructure, helping to accelerate translation of preclinical research from bench-to-bedside to community implementation. This will be accomplished by better connecting researchers and providing them with access to resources and services, by helping train the next generation of researchers and research teams, and by making the community our partner in clinical and translational research.

The CCTS Research Education, Training, and Career Development Component offers a wide range of opportunities for researchers who are interested in clinical and translational science, providing access to innovative training initiatives and successful programs. Certificate programs include the Clinical and Translational Science Training Program and the Vocabulary of Clinical and Translational Science.

The **Clinical and Translational Science (CTS) Training Program** identifies those motivated to further their clinical and translational research

training. This training program provides six months of research training, through 50 hours of lectures and interactive sessions. Didactic instruction includes lectures within the following modules: Clinical Trials, Epidemiology, Biostatistics, Ethics, Clinical Genetics Research, Behavioral Research, Outcomes Research, Dissemination of Results, and Grant Writing and Funding Opportunities. All of the sessions are presented by experienced clinical and translational researchers or individuals with special expertise in areas such as grants and contracts and regulatory issues. MD/PhD students in their basic science years are encouraged to apply for the program. The Selection Committee for the CTS Training Program chooses up to 25 candidates each year through a competitive review process. A Call for Applications is announced each Fall. The program begins in January of each year and culminates in June, with lectures held on Wednesday mornings.

The **Vocabulary of Clinical and Translational Science**, a 20-hour survey course, includes fundamental information on hypothesis generation and testing; informatics; biostatistics; epidemiology and population research; clinical trials; ethics; overviews of translational and outcomes research; accessing information; the IRB and oversight of research; and critical review of clinical and translational literature. The Vocabulary course is required for all School of Medicine clinical fellows who are in fellowship programs longer than one year and serves as the introductory coursework for the Clinical and Translational Science Training Program. The Vocabulary of CTS course is held for 2 consecutive weeks in September of each year. MSTP students early in their training may find this course a good introduction to issues specific to clinical and translational research which may

be overlooked in basic science research focused training.

Another component of the CCTS is The **James A. Pittman Society for Clinical and Translational Science** is named in honor of James A. Pittman, M.D. Dr. Pittman served as director of the Division of Endocrinology and co-chairman of the Department of Medicine at UAB. In 1973, Dr. Pittman was appointed Dean of the School of Medicine at the University of Alabama, a position in which he served for 19 years. During Dr. Pittman's tenure as Dean, the School of Medicine underwent dramatic growth and earned its recognition as one of the top medical schools in the nation. Dr. Pittman was instrumental in establishing the UAB Center for Advanced Medical Studies (CAMS). CAMS was created by Dr. Pittman as a forum for scholarly discussions between students, faculty, and visitors on subjects relevant to the advancement of medicine. CAMS was renamed the Pittman Center for Advanced Medical Studies (PCAMS) in 1997.

The Pittman Society for Clinical and Translational Science, in the tradition of PCAMS, serves as a campus wide forum for discussions between students, faculty, and invited speakers on all aspects of clinical and translational science. Membership in the society is open to all interested undergraduate and graduate students, professional students, post-graduate fellows, and faculty and requires completion of a simple application. Membership will provide students with the unique opportunity to learn about ongoing clinical and translational research at UAB, meet potential research and career mentors, and interact with others at all career stages who share an interest in clinical and translational science.

RESTAURANT REVIEWS

Stephanie Brosius and Mika Guzman

Around campus:

No free lunch available today? Check out one of these restaurants within walking distance of Volker.

Taziki's Greek Fare

Taziki's is a great restaurant if you have a taste for Mediterranean food but cannot wait for the Greek food festival in the fall. The portions are hearty yet still provide a balanced meal with a variety of meats, salads and gyros. In addition to the normal menu, there is also a daily special which is constantly changing. Unless you want to stick to salad, Taziki's is probably not the restaurant of choice for vegetarians but Tuesday nights boast \$1 appetizers and drafts and 10% off entrees with your student ID.

Sandella's Flatbread

Located under the overpass by the 4th Avenue parking deck, Sandella's Flatbread is a cute restaurant with reasonable prices and good sized portions. They offer healthy meal options and sides such as raw vegetables and hummus. Additionally, this restaurant is vegetarian friendly and has a rotating monthly special. You can't go wrong with anything on the menu.

Los Juanes

Good food, great service and an opportunity to practice your Spanish if you desire with the friendly staff. This small restaurant provides unlimited chips and salsa as

well as a fantastic cheese dip. The lunch specials are both cheap and generously portioned, so bring your appetite. Los Juanes is a must if you like Mexican food.

Dreamland

Not really walking distance from campus when you only have an hour for lunch, but still close by. This restaurant has a great ambiance with its sarcastic wall postings, license plates and pop culture paraphernalia. The menu is simple with about 5 choices for entrees and 3 choices for sides so all you need to decide is how much BBQ you want.

Five Points:

Another key medical student hang-out region that is home to many bars, restaurants and clubs.

Mellow Mushroom

Take a trip back to the hippie era with the neon colors and black lights that feature psychedelic murals on all the walls. The Mellow Mushroom boasts unique pizza combinations if you are feeling adventurous and also allow you to create your own combination if not. This is a great place to go if you are sick of Pizza Hut but don't have enough time to venture too far from your textbooks.

Fire and Ice

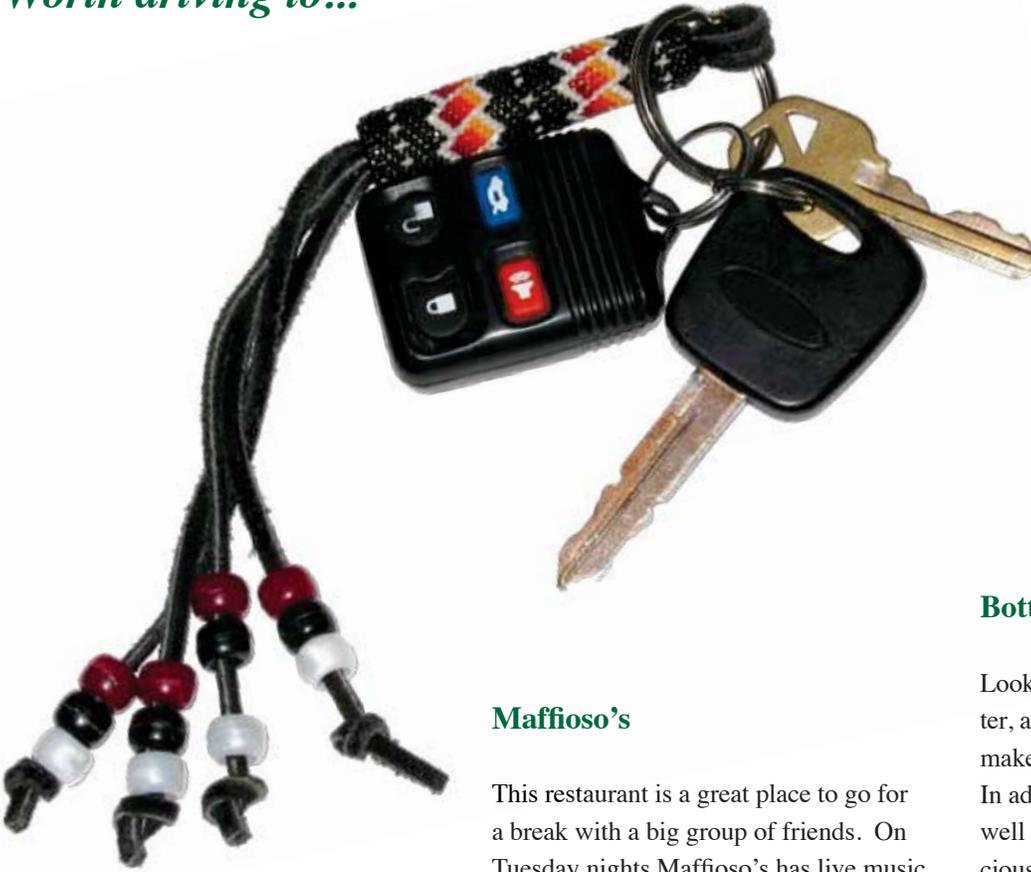
Fire and Ice is a very original restaurant featuring an all you can eat, mix-your-own dish assembly line where you pile bowls high with meats, veggies and pasta and then select your sauce. All entrees are grilled in the center of the restaurant while you watch. This restaurant is a bit expensive but coupons are available online if you join the Fire and Ice club, and once a week Fire and Ice hosts college student night where you get ½ price meals if you bring your ID.

Surin West

Surin West is a popular Thai restaurant which is very close to campus. The restaurant isn't overly pricey, the ambience is pleasant, the waitstaff friendly, and the service prompt. With that said, Surin West does specialize more in fusion dishes as opposed to true authentic Thai food.

RESTAURANT REVIEWS

Worth driving to...



Petrocelli's

Home of giant rolls and enormous lunch specials, Petrocelli's is a cheap Italian restaurant with good service. The only downside is that it is ~20-25 minutes away from campus on 280.

Silver Coin Indian Grill

This restaurant serves traditional Indian food and has an extensive menu with large portions. While it is not the cheapest restaurant at ~\$15 per entrée, the food was quite good. However, if you want to eat here, I would strongly recommend getting take-out because the service was terrible. Even though the restaurant was empty, we still waited for 30 minutes for our check.

Maffioso's

This restaurant is a great place to go for a break with a big group of friends. On Tuesday nights Maffioso's has live music, ½ price beers and buy one get one free slices of pizza. They have a large selection of beers and unique and tasty pizzas that are big enough to split.

Machu Picchu

This Peruvian restaurant is close to Vulcan Park and is definitely one to be tried if one is interested in some tasty Latin American cuisine. The food will be familiar, yet exotic, reflecting the influence that immigrants from Japan and Italy have had on Peruvian cuisine. Available food will include steak dishes, grilled chicken dishes, spaghetti dishes (including fettuccini Alfredo), fried-rice dishes, stews, and fried fish. However, all of these dishes will have a Peruvian twist. Feeling a little bit more courageous? Then make sure to try the goat stew, the beef heart skewers, as well as the raw fish platters.

BottleTree Cafe

Looking for a place that is full of character, authenticity, and entertainment? Then make sure to stop by the BottleTree Café. In addition to being a live music venue as well as bar, the BottleTree has both a delicious as well as eclectic mix of food that caters heavily to vegetarians and vegans. However, carnivores will still be able to find equally delicious meals. As for décor, you will find the place decorated with vintage wood paneling, old southern gospel records, pop art paintings of del monte canned fruit, and plastic snowmen. The bottom line is that the BottleTree is great and underrepresented.

Shangri La

You don't need to go to the far East for some tasty and authentic Chinese food. Instead, a ten-minute drive to Shangri La will suffice in satisfying your needs for exotic sauces and palatable flavors. Although the service can be slow at times, this place is great for couples or big parties. Best selling dishes include the sesame chicken, Mongolian beef, Mo Shu Pork, and the Szechuan Combination.



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Andrea Lynn Stanus

This month the UAB MSTP and many others suffered the loss of an exceptional person, Andrea Lynn Stanus. For those who didn't know Andi well, she was a beautiful, intelligent, and ambitious woman committed to her love of science and dedicated to serving the community. To those who were fortunate enough to know her, we will remember the energetic, hilarious, and compassionate friend that touched our lives in a way so few can. Talented beyond the classroom, she was a gifted violinist who also enjoyed running and any activity with her friends. It is devastating to report that Andi passed away November 20th, 2009 at her home in Pennsylvania. As we mourn the loss of our dear friend Andi, her life and her effects on our lives will be recognized at a memorial service here in Birmingham. Furthermore, the community will continue the mourning process through support of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention which is dedicated to suicide awareness and prevention. Andi will be cherished as a special woman, whose large heart embraced many.

The UAB MSTP would like to thank the following for their important contributions to *The Vulcan Letter*:

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