

THE VULCAN LETTER

Voice of the MSTP at the University of Alabama at Birmingham

Winter 2012

The pulse: a student perspective on life in Birmingham
compiled by Steven Witte

Birmingham, a Surprisingly Great Place to Live



Evan Thomas, GS-3

ArizonaState University

When I was asked to write this piece, I thought for a second, and then had no trouble promptly agreeing as a myriad of contributing ideas popped into my mind with no delay. Prior to coming to Birmingham, I attended colleges in Phoenix and Berkeley, both cities with all the benefits of having a large metropolitan population. Although I grew up in Alabama, I was apprehensive about moving back, and suffered no shortage of jibes from my classmates in Berkeley.

Upon arrival though, I found Birmingham had everything I wanted in an area to attend school. Here are my top reasons why Birmingham is a surprisingly great place to live:

1. Cost of living

Incredibly low for being in a city; I'd challenge anyone to find a similarly sized city where one's MSTP stipend could go further. Many students are able to buy a house on their stipend; some, even more impressively support families on their stipends!

2. Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport

Within ten minutes of campus is an international airport (the regional hub for Southwest) that can get you anywhere in the country with usually no more than a single connection, for less than \$400. My average time to get through security is 5 minutes. If you're not checking a bag, you can arrive 30 minutes before your flight and still always make your flight. Ridiculous.

3. Food/Drink



Ok, so it's not Berkeley or New York where every type of food imaginable is within walking/subway distance, but there's really not much lacking within 15 minutes in any direction of town. Sushi, bbq, thai, indian, Italian, steak, Mexican, etc are all readily available, in varying degrees of quality and price according to your needs. My favorites:

- a. Sushi: Jinsei – pricy, but not too bad if you don't need to stuff yourself. Excellent mojito variety.
- b. BBQ: Full Moon – amazing, no question. TJ's on 4th is good and right next to hospital.

c. Thai: Surin – Not much choice here, but only because Surin is solid enough that competing Thai places don't bother trying anywhere near.

d. Steak: Fleming's – in the entrance to summit, lively bar; great place to meet local well-todos and network. Watch out for freshly divorced Mountain Brook cougars.

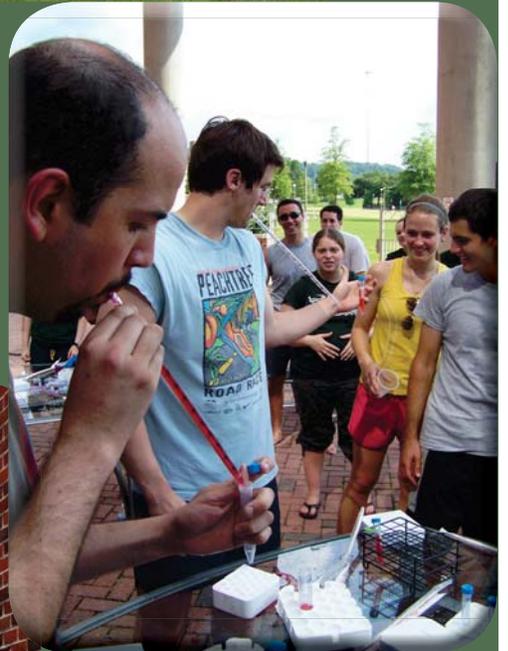
e. Mexican: Cocina Superior – ok, not true Mexican, but it's damn good. Get there for happy hour or drinks get a bit pricy.

f. Pizza: Hungry Howie's -- \$6 dollars for a large 1-topping, with a flavored crust option, and open til 2AM....no contest here.

g. Italian: Bongiorno's – this little place is nestled away in Crestline Village, and is one of Birmingham's hidden gems. 2.5 star prices for 3.5 star quality. It's never filled up, although they prefer you to make a reservation. Great wine selection, lots of pasta varieties, and several gourmet pizzas that you can split for an affordable, but expensive-seeming date!

h. Breakfast: Crestline bagel – fresh, daily in-house made bagels of 20 varieties, with at least 10 cream cheese options. Best coffee in Birmingham. Owners are incredibly nice.

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2011 MSTP RETREAT

NEGOTIATING YOUR FIRST FACULTY POSITION

As told to Stephanie Brosius

Dr. Jill Adamski is an assistant professor of pathology specializing in transfusion medicine. She is an alumnus of the UAB MSTP. What follows is a synopsis of her advice from the 2011 MSTP retreat on the preparation necessary to be a competitive applicant for faculty positions:

Planning ahead

When you are looking for residency programs and applying, check with them about the types of research opportunities that are available. Even if you are not looking at “fast track” programs, some have research years built in and will continue to pay you the resident salary while doing research. While you are checking out research programs, also make sure you check out investigators at each institution to find someone you can work with. If you are already interested in something, you don’t want to start all over in a new field where you won’t be as productive since the topic is not similar to your thesis project. You don’t want to become a first year graduate student again in your residency.

The most important thing is to not let your CV stagnate. You would be surprised how busy you get with residency and then a year or two goes by and nothing new was added to your CV. You have to start applying for fellowships during second year of residency and it comes up fast, therefore you need to keep your CV as active as possible. Take advantage of any type of research opportunities,

QC (quality control?) projects, or QA (quality assurance?) projects; get on house staff committees, or write up case studies. Even without publications, do something extra. When you do get on different house staff committees, this is a good tool for networking for staying in academics; get to know people in other fields and administrators. When applying for residencies and you feel like your PhD is an advantage. Once you are in residency and if you have PhD and have not done anything, it looks worse than if you have straight MD and haven’t done anything, as there is an expectation that you will maintain some kind of research presence.

Start planning early for your job talk; most people do not realize what you have to do to get a job and what the application process is like. If you’ve identified a project early on in your residency and can make a contribution to something novel then you are golden during the application process. You will have to give a job talk to stay in academics and no one wants to hear a review of a disease. They want to know you have participated in

some research and contributed to a field of study during your residency.

Networking revisited

Get to know your attendings and your chair; they can help you search and prepare for your job interviews, giving you all kinds of advice. Many of the attendings who knew she wanted to go into transfusion medicine would talk to colleagues and see if they were hiring. In this way, she was able to learn about word of mouth job opportunities. If you are staying in academia, you need to meet with the chair at every department you are interviewing at. It is a good idea to develop a relationship with your chair and practice interviewing, so you can

learn what is reasonable to expect and what you should prepare for (start up funds and research time). You don’t want to go in for an interview and be asked how much you want in start up funds and you haven’t even thought about that question.

Go to national meetings and ideally present at the meetings and talk to people. Have your attendings at the meetings introduce you to other leaders in the field. Transfusion medicine is relatively small, therefore, having gone to a lot of meetings, Dr. Adamski had met everyone she interviewed



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i. Bars: Tie between Jacksons & J Clyde – both of these bars are great for different reasons. Jacksons has a young, fun crowd – especially on Tuesday night for ½ price drinks. J Clyde always has about ~250 different beers of all styles and heritages, ½ price draft beers (non-high gravity) on Tuesdays and Thursday. I recommend the Palm ale.

4. Outdoors

So, I love to run, bike, and swim. Birmingham's great for all of it. Your best bet is Oak Mountain State Park, about 15 minutes down I-65 from downtown. Cycling, mountain biking, trail running, open water swimming, paddleboating, hiking, camping, horseback riding, golf...it's all there. Double Oak Trail (17 miles) was ranked one of Runner's World's crown jewel trail runs of America. If you're too lazy/time-strapped to drive very far for your run, try the Jemison/Lakeshore trail combo.

Cahaba river is also great. There are several parks along various spots. Hiking, trail running, and mtn biking are all options. In the summer after a good rain, tubing is a lot of fun too.



The new Railroad Park downtown is a great place to jog, walk your dog, or just hang out. Seriously, Birmingham doesn't deserve a park that nice. It's like a mini-Piedmont Park where you won't get shanked or have to step over garbage.

5. Weather

If you like seasons, but not extremes, this is the place for you. Summer is hot, but not unbearable. Winter is cold, and you'll probably

see snow once or twice per year, but not so cold you hate life (ahem, Chicago). Fall and spring are amazing. The only bad part is that you'll be stuck in your lab/office dying to get outside more than you know.

6. Museums

Art gallery is really solid actually. Very high profile exhibits often tour through here. I'm still waiting for a collection of Bierstadt's and Cole's to come through, but there have been great exhibits of surrealists, impressionists, and even the post-modern guys I personally think are a waste of patronage.

Civil Rights Museum – Birmingham's cultural-must-see. I love this place, and drag all visiting relatives here. They always hate the idea, but are really glad they went.

7. Live Music

It's not really my thing, but friends who are into it have no trouble finding great bands to see most nights of the week. Black and White magazine posts a calendar every week with all the local shows.

8. Food/Wine Tastings

Tons of these, mostly free or only \$5. Weekly schedule published in Black and White magazine. Whole Foods has one most Friday afternoons.

What do other MSTP students have to say about the city of Birmingham? The following compilation of the activities and interests of a few of our students should give you a good idea.



Jeff Singer, MS2
Duke University

Favorite thing to do around Birmingham to get away from med/grad school: The beauty of Birmingham is that "getting away" to great hiking/climbing/or swimming holes in the summer is less than an hour in any direction. 3 different hiking mountains and a boulder field within 20 minutes...yes please!

Favorite thing to do on the weekend: Summer weekends: Tubing down the Cahaba river with a group of friends and a cooler full of snacks and refreshments.

One thing in Birmingham everyone needs to experience: Depends what you're into. If you're not from the South (this guy), the Civil Rights Institute is pretty incredible. The weather lends itself to outdoor exploring. There is also an awesome brew pub culture here (one of my favorite places has 52 taps) with a legit home brew store.

Favorite place for date night: A couple weeks ago...Little Saigon has the best Pho (Vietnamese noodle soup) i've had outside of San Francisco. Afterwards, you're not too far away from a movie theater playing the Lion King in 3D and midnight showing of the new Muppets movie.

Favorite thing to do around Birmingham to get away from med/grad school: Birmingham has so many great things to do if you look. My favorite is taking my dog for walks at Railroad park or making him sit through their summer movie series.

Favorite thing to do on the weekend: It's a tie between enjoying a beer in the newly opened tasting rooms at one of our two local breweries, Good People or Avondale, and

seeing a good band at either The Bottletree or Workplay. If you live in Birmingham and aren't regularly participating one of these, shame on you!

One thing in Birmingham everyone needs to experience:

Everyone in Birmingham should see a movie or concert at the Alabama theater. It will take your breath away. I recommend either attending our annual film festival: The Sidewalk Film Festival or attending the theater's Christmas movie series. The Christmas series features pre-show caroling. Best movies in that series? "White Christmas" or "Home Alone" (Only because they foolishly don't count "Die Hard" as a Christmas movie).

Favorite place for date night:

Tortugas is a wonderful local restaurant. They've got amazing Chicago style deep dish pizza in an warm, intimate atmosphere. It's a true Birmingham treasure. If your date doesn't appreciate it- you're wasting your time.

Favorite destination spot around Birmingham:

I love Camping and Hiking in Talladega National Forest or the Sipsey Wilderness. Alabama has some great outdoors if your into that sort of thing. Bring bug spray and don't go in the middle of summer!



Sinifunanya E Nwaobi, GS3 Rhodes College

Favorite thing to do around Birmingham to get away from med/ grad school:

Salsa dance

Favorite thing to do on the weekend:

Again, salsa dance.

One thing in Birmingham everyone needs to experience:

The spectacular views of Birmingham from Argyle Rd and surrounding areas.

Favorite place for date night:

Trattoria Centrale aka ZaZas - only open for dinner on Friday night. It's just the right thing to do.

Favorite destination spot around Birmingham:

I frequently go to Atlanta or New Orleans. But Jacksonville, Fl is great for some beach time.

Daniel Ditoro, MS2

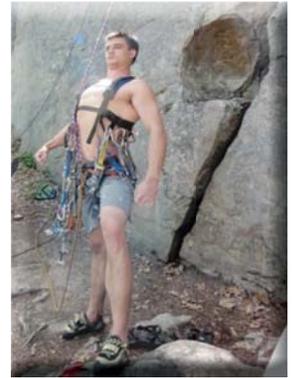
University of Texas

Favorite thing to do around Birmingham to get away from med/grad school:

Climbing at Horse Pens. Best bouldering in the south east US bar none and only 45 minutes from campus.

Favorite thing to do on the weekend:

Climbing at Horse Pens, of course. If that's not in the cards then disc golf at George Ward Park.



One thing in Birmingham everyone needs to experience:

Duh. Horse Pens. And Sloss is really cool. You can wander anywhere, climb on all the old machinery, read a book in a shaded area. Great spot.

Favorite place for date night:

Little Savannah for dinner without a doubt, followed by a few drinks at Parkside, the best bar in town.

Favorite destination spot around Birmingham:

Haha. Horse Pens you fools. Or one could venture further to a huge range of excellent sport and trad climbing spots all within a couple hour drive.

NEGOTIATING FACULTY...

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with when looking for jobs and wasn't an unknown entity. She would also recommend collaborating with people, as you can get involved in multi-institutional clinical trials. All-in-all, you must do anything possible to network as a resident. Start to get your name out in your field of study. We are a bit older and more ma-

ture than our colleagues. You have been an expert in something before, so you have more confidence to put yourself out there. Find a good mentor in your field, do this immediately as soon as you start residency. Some programs set you up with people once you pick a field. Find someone doing research who maintains a clinical

presence. If you have a close relationship with your mentor you can ask them about anything that comes up. Finally, in addition to hearing about jobs via word-of-mouth, also look in journals specific for your field of study and online.

RAILROAD PARK: BIRMINGHAM'S LATEST HOTSPOT

By: Anna Joy Graves

New York may have Central Park, but Birmingham is proud to present its very own Railroad Park. This 21-acre space is set in the heart of the city and lends the area its unique character and charm. Opened in the fall of 2010, the park embraces the railroad, which is a pivotal part of the city's historical steel industry, alongside the Birmingham skyline.

Located between 18th Street and 14th Street along 1st Avenue North and 1st Avenue South, the park boasts refreshing green spaces, a lake with connecting waterways and a water curtain, a natural amphitheater, several playgrounds, and a skateboarding area. The park draws walkers, joggers, and families with children who bring along their scooters and bikes.

Branded as a historic park that "bridges downtown areas of Birmingham with the UAB campus," students say that they like to sometimes go there for a picnic, a jog after class, or even a quick study break.

Daniel DiToro, a second year MSTP student, described the park as being a place with a friendly atmosphere. "The first time I



went there, a friend and I were just chucking a Frisbee around. There was another guy throwing a football with his kids and we ended up joining them. The dad had a really mean arm and it was a lot of fun. Later, the kids came and played Frisbee with us.

"It's a great addition to the town," said DiToro.

The Railroad Park project began in 2008 and was completed in the summer of 2010. Construction entailed pulling up century old cobblestone and replacing it with fresh dirt and lawn. The bricks were restored and later used in the park along with other rocks and materials excavated from the local Birmingham area. The result is a 21st century space that remains connected its history. The modern gleam of the park is matched with an artful display

of its roots.

Citizens of Birmingham (or Bham, as locals affectionately call the city) rallied alongside city officials, Jefferson County, and the Railroad Park Foundation to raise the \$22 million dollars that saw the project to its completion. Katherine Estes Billmeier, a Foundation employee, told the Black & White Birmingham City Paper, "Birmingham has no major river running through the downtown area, so here the rails are our rivers."

Whether you are looking for an open space to teach your friends how to play rugby or just want to go for a romantic stroll as the sun sets, the silhouettes of the old rail cars serve as a fabulous backdrop. Railroad Park is a place you will want to come back to time and time again.

TASTY TRIPS 2011: CONFERENCE UPDATES

National MD/PhD Student Conference Experiences (July 2011, Keystone Colorado)

6 David Gaston, GS-4
It can be rare to meet the

scientists who paved the way for your project. Frequently "meeting" such scientists is more akin to birdwatching. You spot them from afar at a meeting and hear their call, well, their keynote address rather, but do not have a chance to interact substantially. I am

pleased to report this was not my experience at Keystone. Thomas Waldmann, MD, was one of five keynote speakers at the conference. Dr. Waldmann lead a team to discover the cytokine interleukin-15 (IL-15) while I was in elementary school. Fast-forward to

graduate school, and IL-15 plays a very prominent role in my thesis research. The chance to meet Dr. Waldmann was the primary reason I attended Keystone. Yes, I was encouraged to go because of wonderful reports I've heard about past conferences (I can now say they are all true), but I went for input on my project from the IL-15 expert. Shockingly, he stood by my poster speaking with me for nearly twenty minutes. The next day, we had dinner together. Dr. Waldmann not only demonstrated interest in my project, he went on to show genuine interest in my continuing education. And that's a wonderful thing about the Keystone conference - the keynote speakers care about the education of MD/PhD students. This little story is not unique. I observed Dr. Waldmann interacting with many other students (students who do not study IL-15, mind you). The other keynote speakers were also spotted, not only up on stage, but in the midst of the attendees. There was no birdwatching for leaders of a given field at this conference. Instead, you shook their hands and had dinner with them. Go to Keystone.

Sara Stone, MS-2

The Annual MD/PhD conference in Keystone, CO was a great way for me, as a second year student to get to interact with MD/PhD candidates from



different schools and get a better understanding of what other MD/PhD programs are like and the challenges common to all

programs. Talking with students in their graduate years and seeing their posters and oral presentations helped me get a feel for what a thesis project might entail, advantages and disadvantages of different mentoring styles, and what that means for the student. The grant-writing breakout session helped guide me in writing my mock F30, but the most interesting part was hear-



ing the questions asked of the breakout session leader by F30-writing graduate students. Many had questions about what parts of their work to put into the grant and it was clear that often the student's idea about what should be included in the grant wasn't always congruous with the mentor's ideas. The answers for situations of conflict were always context specific, but included more discussion with the mentor, strong consideration of the results preliminary data, translation potential, and seeking a second opinion from a thesis committee member.

The food was pretty good, with just a few bad dishes. I was very

disappointed to find that the coffee and tea breaks were strictly limited to one half hour and that there were no snacks between meals. The scenery was obviously incredible. Wild flowers bloomed in green meadows near rushing mountain streams carrying the clear cool water of snow melted from the still white mountain tops.

Stacey Watkins, GS-3

I would recommend this conference to everyone. Not only do you get exposure to great science through the posters and presentations but it is an opportunity to meet fellow MD/PhDs throughout all the years of the program. The keynote speakers were phenomenal. They covered a wide range of topics and were some very heavy hitters in academia, industry and the public health sector. I attended several breakout sessions. The first "Strategies for balancing work and life as an MD/PhD" was led by associate director of UPenn's MSTP. She provided tips on how to make sure that you have a meaningful scientific career with a full family life. I also attended the session titled, "Applying to residency," which covered very basic but important tips on how to interview and present yourself so that the PhD becomes an asset in the application process. I also participated in a hike through the Colorado Rocky Mountains which made for a wonderful morning. Some of the people I met at this conference were also at SEMMS in Atlanta in September and I was able to reconnect with them again, making my Keystone atten-

dance invaluable to my future as a physician scientist.

Jackie Zimmerman, GS-3

The National MD/PhD Student Conference is an extraordinary opportunity to meet with students from programs across the country and to interact with keynote speakers who are leaders in their fields. Not only is the location picturesque, but the speakers are nationally and internationally recognized for their work in their respective fields. We had the opportunity to listen to Dr. Anthony Atalla MD, the Chair of Urology at Wake Forest University, whose work in regenerative medicine is truly remarkable. We also got to hear Dr. Ramon Parsons MD/PhD, who studies role of PTEN in cancer development. The conference has already confirmed Dr. Francis Collins MD/PhD as one of the speakers for the 2012 conference. The career panel on Sunday provided a chance to hear about the unique

career decisions of senior physician scientists working in a variety of academic and industry roles. Additionally, there was ample time to spend with



Universities Allied For Essential Medicines Annual Conference

10.29-10.30

Baltimore (Hopkin's)

The best part of this conference was... Caliber of participants. MSTs, JDs, PhDs from all over the world. Amazing.

The snacks were... The lobby was a cornucopia of free food. Ate like a pig.

Brian Dizon, MS-3

Association of American Immunologists

May 2011

San Francisco, CA

The best part of this conference was getting to talk about my work. This meeting is good about giving students the opportunity to give oral presentations, and UAB is very well-represented. The snacks were very expensive. Trainee awards are available and very generous. I would also check out the symposia topics before registering. The variety of topics vary every year, so things that interest you may be underrepresented; therefore, it may not be worth it to go on certain years.

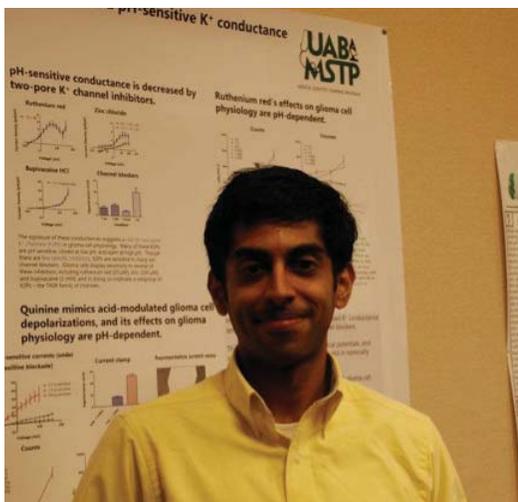
students from other institutions to discuss some the challenges and benefits of MD/PhD programs. The poster sessions and student presentations were great occasions to learn about research focuses at other campuses. I would definitely recommend this conference to all MD/PhD students, as it is an excellent learning and networking opportunity.

John Jarboe, GS-

National Student Research Forum, April 2011

Galveston, TX

The best part of this conference was the open bar poolside on the last day and free beer in the hospitality suite. The snacks were muffins, danishes, juice, coffee etc. available throughout the day. Lunch and dinner were catered.



Daniel DiToro, Steve Witte, Anna Joy Graves

Announcements

DISSERTATION DEFENSES

Congratulations to Drs. Michael Alberti, Nicole Brossier, Travis Lewis, Asher Albertson, Victor Lin, Brian Dizon, Doug Gladden and Aimee Merino on defending their thesis! We wish you the best of luck as you transition back into clinics!

PUBLICATIONS

Pyle LC, Ehrhardt A, Mitchell LH, Fan L, Ren A, Naren AP, Li Y, Clancy JP, Bolger GB, Sorscher EJ, Rowe SM. Regulatory domain phosphorylation to distinguish the mechanistic basis underlying acute CFTR modulators. *Am J Physiol Lung Cell Mol Physiol*. 2011 Jul 1.

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Oxidative stress and myocardial remodeling in chronic mitral regurgitation. *Am J Med Sci*. 2011 Aug;342(2):114-9.

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Qadri YJ, Rooj AK, Fuller CM. ENaCs and ASICs as Therapeutic Targets. Am J Physiol Cell Physiol. 2012 Jan 25.

AWARDS

Congratulations to Vishnu Cuddapah and Stacey Watkins for placing second (Vishnu) and third (Stacey) for their poster presentations at the Neurobiology Retreat.

Brian Warmus won Best poster - Student, Adult Disorders -at the Bevill Neuroscience Symposium.

Medical Student Research Day 2011 Winners!!
Long Term Oral Presentation:
Vishnu Cuddapah
Poster Group B: David Gaston
Poster Group G: Ryan Corrick
Poster Group H: Asher Albertson
Poster Group I: Brian Warmus
Poster Group J: John Jarboe

FAMILY



Travis Hull married Erika Gruss on July 10, 2011 in Pennsylvania.



Graham Bridger Whitley entered the world November 7, 2011 ! 7 lbs 4oz & 21 inches long. Congrats to Sarah Whitley!

FUN



Congrats to Jennifer Stanley on the birth of Amelia Elisabeth Coty on 10-24-11. She was born at 9:50pm and weighed 7lbs 15oz and was 19.75in long.



Congrats to Elizabeth Ma and the rest of team Burn Unit on placing in the annual gurney races during Homecoming week 2011!



MEDICAL SCIENTIST TRAINING PROGRAM





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