Changing the face of medicine

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Dr. Russell Ledet overcame poverty to earn a PhD in Molecular Oncology from New York University and a dual Doctor of Medicine and Master of Business Administration from Tulane University.

Dr. Russell Ledet (MD/MBA ’22) never dreamed that one day he would don a white doctor’s coat as a graduate of Tulane School of Medicine. Nor did he imagine he would earn a PhD in Molecular Oncology from New York University or an MBA from the Freeman School of Business or launch a nonprofit to help minority students achieve success as physicians.

But Ledet, who is currently a Triple Board resident at Indiana University’s School of Medicine, has accomplished all of this and more.

“A lot of the things I’m doing now, I didn’t even know were possible.” he says.

Ledet grew up in a predominantly Black community in Lake Charles, Louisiana, surrounded by poverty, food insecurity and crime. His mother, a certified nurse's aide, struggled to support Ledet and his brother.

"My mama was raising us as a single mother, and we were always trying to figure out how to make ends meet," Ledet says. "But by the time I was in high school, it got tougher for my mom to raise two kids by herself. It got to the point where we were digging in dumpsters in the back of Sam's Club to figure out what we were going to eat for dinner."

For Ledet, watching his mother strive to put food on the table was a turning point.

"That really was my motivation to figure out a way to get out," Ledet says. He decided to enlist in the Navy, where he could earn a reliable income. "My original plan wasn't to go to college. I didn't even apply to college. I just wanted to make a paycheck and send home some money when I could."

Around the time Ledet was considering joining the Navy, he had a serendipitous encounter that would change his life. Ledet met Mallory Alise Brown, who would later become his wife, through a technical college program they were both participating in. "She was really the person who let me know that there was a whole different world out there," Ledet says.

Brown encouraged Ledet to apply to college, and to his surprise, he was accepted at Southern University in Baton Rouge. Jumping at the chance to earn a college degree, Ledet enrolled at Southern with the intention of becoming a social worker and uplifting his community.

To support his family while he was in college, Ledet took a job as a security guard at Baton Rouge General Hospital, another decision that proved life changing.

Working at the hospital, Ledet observed the inner workings of health care. "When you're a security guard, you see everything," he says. "You see all the doctors coming in. You see all the people with gunshot wounds coming in. You see people

having heart attacks and strokes.”

Energized by the adrenaline-fueled environment, Ledet became inspired to seek a career in medicine; there was just one problem.

“Every doctor I would ask would tell me security guards can’t become doctors,” Ledet says.

Every doctor except one, that is.

Dr. Patrick Greiffenstein, who at the time was a surgery resident at Baton Rouge General, invited Ledet to shadow him during his rounds. “He was the first person who gave me a shot,” Ledet recalls.

The opportunity propelled Ledet forward, eventually leading him to earn a PhD in Molecular Oncology from New York University and a dual Doctor of Medicine and Master of Business Administration from Tulane University.

At Tulane, Ledet met mentors and patients who would continue to shape his career. One day while, shadowing Dr. Myo Thwin Myint, Tulane’s Triple Board Residency program director, Ledet encountered a patient who helped him realize the importance of diverse representation in medicine.

“Myo had a clinic on Claiborne Avenue, and I came in and saw one of his patients,” Ledet says. “He was a little Black kid from the Ninth Ward. When the little boy saw me, he just stood at the door staring at me. It was like he saw a ghost. He had never seen a doctor who looked like me before.”

Ledet eventually got the boy to open up to him by connecting their shared background. “We started talking about red beans and rice and honey buns,” Ledet laughs. “That little kid motivated me. That’s when I decided I would be a triple board-certified doctor.” Today, Ledet is halfway through the Triple Board Residency program at Indiana University, studying Pediatrics, Psychiatry, and Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

As of 2023, only about 6% of doctors in the United States identified as Black, a statistic Ledet intends to change. In 2019, he founded The 15 White Coats, a nonprofit organization that provides community and financial support to minority students pursuing careers in medicine. The organization grew out of a trip Ledet and classmates took to the Whitney Plantation in Edgard, Louisiana. While there, the group — consisting of 15 Black medical students — took a photo in their white coats standing in front of the plantation's former slave quarters. The photo went viral, sparking a conversation about minorities in the medical field and inspiring Ledet to take action.



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"Nobody ever told a lot of these kids that they could be a doctor," Ledet says. "But that's the heart of what we do at The 15 White Coats. We try to inspire as many kids

as we can.”

As a joint degree recipient, Ledet says his MBA gives him the credibility and knowhow to move between the medical and business worlds.

“As a Black man, I have to be twice as good. When I start to talk about how taking away Black jobs is affecting profit margins, people listen because I got my MBA from a top business school,” he says.

Ledet’s impact has been felt around the country, and his activism and philanthropy have been featured in national media outlets including *People Magazine, NBC Nightly News* and *Good Morning America,* among others.

“We’re doing the exact work that our community needs us to do,” Ledet says of his philanthropic work.

When Ledet reflects on all he has accomplished, he remembers the people and community that helped him along the way.

“I come from the community that I’m helping,” Ledet says. “My grandma couldn’t read or write, but she had a lot of wisdom and would always take care of people. She always said to me, ‘No matter what you do, love God’s children and treat everybody right.’”

Today, Ledet is living up those words of wisdom.

“I’m supposed to be taking care of people,” Ledet says. “That’s what I do as a doctor.”