

AS A YOUNG ADULT,
CHARLES CRUTCHFIELD '82
POSTPONED MEDICAL
SCHOOL TO FLY JETS. BUT
WHEN HE DECIDED NOT
TO PURSUE A MILITARY
CAREER, HE RETURNED
TO HIS TRUE VOCATION.

TRUE CALLING

BY PHOEBE LARSON

Each spring Charles Crutchfield '82 gives Carleton premed students a glimpse into their future. A Twin Cities dermatologist and visiting professor of biology, Crutchfield teaches "Human Cutaneous Biology for the Pre-Medical Student" as if it were a medical school course. His lectures on the cellular and molecular biology of human skin are the same as those he gives at the University of Minnesota Medical School, where he also teaches. He tours Carleton students around both the University of Minnesota Medical School and his alma mater, the Mayo Clinic Medical School in Rochester, and introduces them at each school to admissions committee members who give them tips on applying. And he invites Carleton alumni who work in the medical field to speak to the class about their

careers. Then Crutchfield, a one-time Carleton biology major who heads Crutchfield Dermatology in Eagan, Minnesota, talks to his students about taking time off after Carleton before going to medical school.

"For students who are unsure of what they want to do, or who have holes in their medical school application they need to fill or have other things they want to get out of their system before they start medical school, it is a natural breakpoint," says Crutchfield. "As you go on in life, it's much tougher to take off large blocks of time."

He speaks from experience, having taken five years off himself to train to become a fighter pilot.

It was an unlikely career move for Crutchfield, who as a child never questioned

his career path. Both his parents are physicians: His father, who still practices in obstetrics and gynecology in St. Paul, has delivered more than 10,000 babies, and his mother, who recently retired as family practice and medical director of Metropolitan Health Plan in Minneapolis, was the first African American woman to graduate from the University of Minnesota Medical School.

"Whenever someone would ask me 'Are you going to be a doctor like your parents?' I would say yes, and they would rub my head and say 'Atta boy!' So I learned early on that that was the right answer," says Crutchfield.

Then, around the time he took a grueling genetics final exam when he was a sophomore at Carleton, Crutchfield saw the Tom Cruise blockbuster *Top Gun*, a tale of elite Navy





professor showed the class a photograph of a man with a strange rash under his arms. “He had gastric carcinoma—stomach cancer,” says Crutchfield. “I thought, ‘How bizarre. You can look at somebody’s skin and determine what’s going on inside of him.’”

After establishing a dermatology practice in 2002, Crutchfield was recognized quickly for his progressive treatments and modern facilities. His practice was the first dermatology clinic in the United States to use electronic medical records; he keeps all patient information in a computerized database and doesn’t use paper charts. His Web site, Crutchfielddermatology.com, regularly wins awards for its content, and he plans to discuss a disease—its causes, treatment options, and side effects—each week via podcasts.

“I use technology as a tool to enable my patients to find me easily and to provide better service to them,” Crutchfield says.

After five years, his practice has 25,000 patients and handles approximately 40,000 patient visits a year. As the sole physician on staff, Crutchfield personally handles approximately 19,000 patient visits each year and oversees 40 employees in his clinic, which includes a phototherapy center, laser center, and spa. About 80 percent of his business comes from medical dermatology (the treatment of acne, psoriasis, eczema, and other diseases), and 20 percent lies in cosmetic dermatology. But that percentage could change as demand grows and the field advances.

“As far as cosmetic dermatology goes, an evolution has begun,” says Crutchfield. “In the near future, between medical devices, lasers, and prescription-strength products, we will do an even better job of combating the signs of aging in a cost-effective way.”

Like his profession, Crutchfield is evolving constantly. “I always try to do better,” he says. “Sometimes it works, sometimes I fall flat on my face, but at least I’m learning.”

It’s a lesson he learned as a young adult—and one he hopes his students will take to heart. ◀

fighter-pilots-in-training. He decided to postpone medical school and enlist in the military.

During a visit to the naval air station in Minneapolis, Crutchfield says, he found the Navy initially lukewarm to his plans to fly jets. “They looked at me, a typical college student in shorts and a T-shirt, and said, ‘Have you thought about being a mechanic?’” Undeterred, Crutchfield took the six-hour entrance exam and two days later got a call from the base commander, who had just received Crutchfield’s scores. “He said, ‘How would you like to be a nuclear physicist? We can arrange a transfer for you from Carleton to MIT.’”

His sights still set on jets, Crutchfield turned down the offer and joined the Navy Reserve on inactive status. After finishing his

degree at Carleton, he enrolled in flight training and officer school, completed the first part of the program, then learned that training to fly jets would require a longer commitment to the military than he was willing to make.

Taking a summer job back home in Minneapolis in a cancer research lab, Crutchfield renewed his interest in biology and research. The following year he entered the Mayo Clinic’s PhD program in molecular biology and eventually was accepted into the combined MD/PhD program.

During the course of his studies, he realized that his heart was in clinical medicine rather than research. One dermatology class was all it took for him to choose his specialty. “I absolutely fell in love with it,” says Crutchfield, recalling the day a dermatology