



Mentors Matter

A conversation with

Akneia Peartree

Dental Assisting Certificate Program '18



Angelita Leon and Akneia Peartree



from left: Akneia Peartree, Shauna Denkensohn, Dr. Robert Glickman, NYU President Andrew Hamilton, Dean Charles Bertolami

Akneia Peartree, '18, a graduate of the first Dental Assisting Certificate Program (DACP) class, remembers becoming interested in oral health when she was 11 years old. It happened while she was attending a camp run by the Fresh Air Fund, the not-for-profit agency that provides free summer vacations in the country to New York City children from low-income communities. A female volunteer who worked as a dental hygienist had taken Akneia, who goes by the nickname "Anaya," to have her teeth cleaned. The young Anaya was also allowed to "shadow" some of the oral health care providers in the clinic.

"The experience really left an impression on me," says Anaya. "Ever since I was a young girl, I have been interested in brushing my teeth and maintaining good oral health. People would always compliment me on my smile, and they still do today."

Now in its third year, the overall goal of the Dental Assisting Certificate Program is to provide highly motivated, un- or underemployed men and women with marketable job skills. The highly selective, six-month tuition-free program is offered twice a year.

"To be selected for the program was a blessing, a dream come true," says Anaya. "I never thought I would actually be attending a top dental school in New York City, and also attending for free."

Anaya, who is 22 years old, grew up in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The "baby" of the family, she is the youngest of 10 siblings who were raised by a single mother in low-income housing. At age 16, Anaya was paired with Shauna Denkensohn, a Fresh Air Fund volunteer, who served as her mentor, especially on the scholastic

front, guiding Anaya through high school by helping her strengthen her study skills, and, most important, helping her discover the range of her abilities. The two remain close today.

"When I first met Anaya, no one had ever encouraged her academically," says Ms. Denkensohn. "I remember helping her study one day. I told her, 'You're smart.' Anaya responded, 'No one has ever told me that.' I realized that the best way I could serve Anaya was by helping her believe in her potential."

Ms. Denkensohn also recalls that when the two first met, Anaya had expressed an interest in one day working in the dental field. Coincidentally, Ms. Denkensohn, whose husband, Michael P. Denkensohn (Stern '73), serves on New York University's Board of Trustees, had heard about the Dental Assisting Certificate Program through her and her husband's interactions with Dean Bertolami. Ms. Denkensohn encouraged Anaya to apply to the program, setting her on the path to her current career.

"Ms. Denkensohn is the one who gave me the confidence and strength to apply to the program, telling me that I could do this."

The Dental Assisting Certificate Program's curriculum is comprised of all core courses in short modules taught by faculty from the College's Department of Dental Hygiene and Dental Assisting, alongside dental faculty and DDS students in the group practices and specialty care clinics.

"Dental assisting is one of the fastest growing health care careers in New York City and much of the country," says program coordinator Angelita Leon. "An 18% increase in employment opportunities is forecast for both full-time and

part-time dental assistants. It has been so exciting to watch this diverse population of dental assisting students go out into the world as compassionate, critical thinking, health care professionals."

Anaya is now working as a full-time dental assistant in the new NYU Dentistry Oral Health Center for People with Disabilities. (See related stories beginning on page 4.) The center is designed specifically to serve people throughout the New York metropolitan area whose disabilities prevent them from receiving care in a conventional dental setting.

"The clinic opened in February 2019, and I'm super excited to be part of it," says Anaya, who had been working as a dental assistant at the Department of Veterans Affairs New York Harbor Health Care System. "I really enjoy helping patients feel comfortable during procedures and putting smiles on their faces."

"The Dental Assisting Certificate Program is a great stepping stone," says Professor Leon. "From here our graduates may decide to continue their studies, become licensed, go into dental hygiene, or they can remain in dental assisting which is rewarding in and of itself."

Looking to the future, Anaya plans to become a dental hygienist. She hopes that her story will inspire others. She eventually wants to mentor underserved youth herself. "Kids need to know that there are people like my mentor Shauna Denkensohn and the faculty at the College of Dentistry who want to open doors for them," says Anaya. "I want these kids to know that opportunities are out there. I also want them to know never to sell yourself short and never think you're not smart enough. You'll never know how much you're capable of until you try." ■