



FALL 2026

Alworth Report

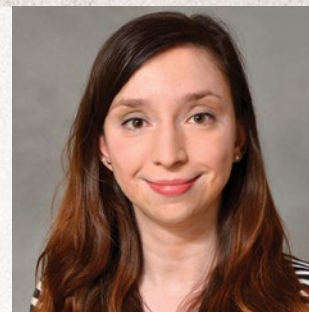
ALWORTH MEMORIAL FUND NEWSLETTER

www.alworthscholarship.org

• ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT •

A Nonlinear Path to Medicine

Alworth alum **Dr. Elissa Downs** reflects on resilience, mentorship, and finding her place in pediatric medicine.



Elissa M. Downs, MD MPH
Associate Professor
Pediatric Gastroenterology,
Hepatology and Nutrition
University of Minnesota
Alworth Alumni Scholar ('99)

Elissa M. Downs, MD MPH, is an Associate Professor of Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition at the University of Minnesota, and an Alworth Alumni Scholar ('99). Nearly 100 years after Marshall W. Alworth graduated from Duluth Central High School, Elissa completed her own high school degree there and received the Alworth Scholarship to pursue a bachelor's degree. After earning a BS in Human Biology, Health, and Society at Cornell University, Elissa did a year of research and then pursued a dual path toward becoming a public health specialist and a dietitian. Ultimately, she felt she could combine all these philosophies into one role and pursued becoming a physician.



We spoke with Elissa about her career journey and the advice she has for students considering healthcare.

> How did the Alworth Scholarship help support your college experience?

The Alworth Scholarship helped support my college experience by allowing me to consider different institutions without being limited by financial aid packages. Because of this advantage, an advanced degree felt more attainable.

> You're a healthcare provider in the Twin Cities area. What are some challenges, and do you have any specialties? Are you working on any research?

As a pediatric subspecialty physician, we can be few and far between. That means children and their families may wait months for an appointment and travel from all over the state –and sometimes beyond.

One of my niche areas is pediatric pancreatology, where I focus much of my clinical research to improve health outcomes.

> You're also an educator. What motivated you to pursue an academic role?

When you embark on a career in medicine, one of the natural pivot points is choosing between private practice and academic medicine. Working in academic medicine provides the opportunity to mentor and educate the next generation of physicians and honor the mentors who shaped your own career.

Your influence as an educator comes less from the lecture hall than from clinical rotations, where direct case examples help cement learning. Discussions of pathophysiology, best practice guidelines, and health in the context of our greater social environment strengthen my care delivery, benefiting the children I care for.



What advice would you give high school students trying to navigate the many careers in healthcare?

A physician is just one member of a multidisciplinary team working together to improve someone's health. Consider your strengths, interests, and work that will challenge and fulfill you. Know that your path may be meandering—you don't have to have it all figured out now. Shadowing or volunteering can help you find the right fit. Consider becoming a medical assistant, medical scribe, EMT, or hospital volunteer. I explored several opportunities, but the most impactful was a rotating hospital volunteer summer program. ■

► How To Apply for \$28,000



Scan QR code for details.

Applications are accepted from November 1 to January 15.

Recipients receive \$28,000 distributed over eight semesters providing they maintain eligibility requirements in a math, science or medical field of study.



Dream it. Achieve it.

HANNAH RONNING

Finding a Voice

How one student's passion for helping others began with her younger brother.

When my youngest brother was little, I watched him try to connect with the world around him. He had so much to say, yet communication wasn't easy, and other children excluded him as they struggled to understand him due to autism and communication disorders. A speech-language pathologist helped him gain confidence, build friendships, and let his personality shine even in the face of adversity. I want to help others like my brother find their voices and truly be themselves. So, I earned my bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences and Disorders at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

I began my undergraduate degree simply hoping to learn how to help children communicate, but I quickly discovered that speech-language pathology reaches far beyond that. Speech-language pathologists work with people across the entire life span, from helping premature infants safely feed in the NICU, to supporting children with speech and language disorders, to helping adults recover after strokes or brain injuries, and even assisting older adults in maintaining their communication, swallowing, cognition, and quality of life. I can confidently say that communication is so much more than just speaking.

Imagine one day, waking up to find out you are unable to speak or swallow safely. You would lose your way of expressing that you love another person, become unable to navigate everyday conversations, and no longer be able to share a meal with a friend. I learned that for many people, this is their reality. Speech-language pathologists have the privilege of helping individuals regain those abilities and reconnect with the people and experiences that matter most.

**Hannah Ronning**

Graduate Student Clinician
Speech-Language Pathology
University of Minnesota Duluth
Alworth Scholarship Recipient

While classroom experiences were amazing, some of my most meaningful experiences happened outside of the classroom. I had the honor of working as an administrative student assistant at the UMD Robert F Pierce Speech Language Hearing Clinic, where I learned from faculty, graduate students, and the families that we serve. I will never forget my first "last day of clinic". I heard stories of clients rediscovering a voice they had lost, while others were expressing themselves with words or gestures or even a click of a button, for the very first time. Listening to their stories of the progress made in just a semester reminded me that communication is simply not about saying something right, it is also about connection,

independence, and belonging.

Today, I am a graduate student clinician at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where I have the privilege of working directly with clients and experiencing firsthand what I had only glimpsed as an undergraduate. This is all possible

"Communication is simply not about saying something right; it is about connection, independence, and belonging."

because the Alworth Scholarship gave me these opportunities and the courage to see the importance of my goal. The Alworth Scholarship not only eased the financial burden of pursuing my education but also gave me the confidence of knowing someone believed in my potential and my dreams. It allowed me to say "yes" to opportunities that shaped me into the clinician and student I am now, and the professional I strive to become. After graduating with my master's degree, I hope to bring speech-language pathology services to underserved communities in Alaska before eventually returning home to the Iron Range, which was the place that first inspired my journey and will always have my heart. ■



Leave It Better Than You Find It

Alworth alum Dayelise Fleigle returned to share her journey from scholarship recipient to orthopedic physician assistant—and offered graduates advice for the road ahead.



In April, the Board of Directors and staff hosted an annual dinner at the Kitchi Gammi Club. Keynote speaker Dayelise Fleigle shared an update on her professional and educational experiences since earning a bachelor's degree in biology and psychology from The College of St. Scholastica. Dayelise graduated nearly debt free thanks to the Alworth Scholarship. She went on to PA school in Oregon and now works as an orthopedic PA in Aitkin, MN.

After the update on her pathway, she spoke directly to the students in the room, some of which were graduating and entering the workforce, and some of which were planning to enter a graduate program in the fall. "My advice to you is to find a way to be involved. Find one extracurricular activity that is meaningful to you and pursue it. Some of you may be

moving to a new city where you don't know anyone. Being involved in something will be an opportunity for you to meet peers that have a similar interest as you. Whatever you choose to do, leave it better than you find it. Continue making positive growth. Lastly, remember the people that supported you and helped get you here. For me that was family, friends, teachers, coaches, but also my neighbors and community members." Dayelise thanked the Board of Directors and staff, ending with this final message to students, "Congratulations again to all of you for your hard work, and to your guests who have walked alongside you on your journey through life. This scholarship has, and will, help you achieve your highest goals." ■

Thank you, Dayelise!



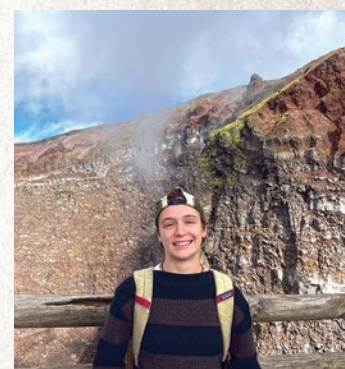
EMELYN BEASTER

The View from Vesuvius

In her own words, Emelyn reflects on how studying volcanology in Italy changed her perspective on geology.

Before studying abroad in Italy, my Geosciences degree largely revolved around studying small-scale processes within the realm of geochemistry, like chemical interactions within sediments or the composition of hydrothermal deposits in cooled magmas. Since I initially started out at Lawrence University with a Chemistry major, geochemistry came naturally to me and applied to my research interests in environmental systems. Yet after I spent the fall semester of 2025 in Sorrento, Italy, I gained a new appreciation for and understanding of the large-scale processes that inform our, and our planet's, existence.

I will never forget the jaw-dropping awe I felt as my Volcanology class summited Mt. Vesuvius during an October field trip. In the caldera, vents radiate superheated steam from any rainwater or condensation that makes its way inside the still-active volcano, and the layers formed from past eruptions are as clear as a layer cake. As much as I love Minnesota and Wisconsin, this was an experience I had to travel far from the Midwest to truly know, and it taught me more than I could've ever imagined about my love for geology. While the study of geology is informed by tiny, chemical interactions that we can't even see with our own two eyes, it's manifested on this beautiful planet as landscape-scale landforms and physical processes that are equally as difficult to comprehend. It's these processes that both made life on Earth possible, and (like the eruptions of Mt. Vesuvius) will impact communities for thousands of years; not only via the devastating impact of an eruption, but, for example, the influence of volcanism on the formation of incredibly fertile soils for agriculture.



Emelyn Beaster

Lawrence University ('27)
Major: Geosciences & Environmental
Studies
Minor: Chemistry
Current Alworth Scholar

Emelyn Beaster continued on page 4...

Although my geologic pursuits will most likely not involve much volcanology - I'm pursuing graduate school programs in the Midwest with a focus in geochemistry of environmental systems - what I learned in Italy fundamentally changed how I think about the scope of my field. I might be studying specific chemical reactions in the muddy sediments of freshwater lakes, but with memories of Mt. Vesuvius reminding me to think on the scale of landscapes and of surrounding communities, I zoom out. I consider chemical transport through watersheds; I wonder about histories of the land around me, and I think about just how many communities may be impacted, and in what variety of ways, by the geology I study. ■

2026 EDUCATOR APPRECIATION LUNCH Featuring Dr. Shawna Weaver

October 22, 11-1:30 pm

Please join us for a complimentary lunch with author, speaker, and environmental educator Dr. Shawna Weaver. With twenty years in a wide variety of education settings, Dr. Weaver centers her work around supporting students to find their way into a lifetime of learning and belonging.

REGISTER



In the Great Hall of the Kitchi Gammi Club in Duluth!



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