

## Gaskins' Pre-Existing Condition

When Devin Gaskins went for a run through the Palouse hills in late May, his mind was moving even faster than his legs. He was taking a break from his University of Washington School of Medicine studies, as he is enrolled in the five-state WWAMI (Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, Idaho) program at the University of Idaho in Moscow. Like nearly everyone else in the nation, he had viewed the unjust death of George Floyd on video, had read the data from competing autopsy results and was trying to make sense of it all. Having grown up in Idaho, with a Black population of less than 1-percent of the state's total population, Gaskins had experienced his own episodes of injustice over the years, and the Floyd death had stirred up several emotions and observations that could remain silent no longer.

He returned from the hills and the words flowed from mind to paper nearly as fast as Gaskins could cover the 100-meters when he ran for the Yotes track team. Within two hours, he had penned the essay titled "Pre-Existing Condition," to spell out his own injuries that already existed "to make it clear in the event of my own murder what actually caused my death."

Gaskins posted it to social media on June 1<sup>st</sup>, and within a few weeks, it was published in a series of newspapers, including the Idaho Statesman, earned him a featured-speaking role at the Idaho Healthcare for Black Lives rally on the Idaho Statehouse steps, and resulted in media interviews on television and radio. His essay is vulnerable and painful to read, and struck a chord with an Idaho audience and beyond.

"I wasn't expecting this much outpouring of support, honestly," said Gaskins. "I wrote the essay as kind of an exercise in just expressing a lot of feelings and thoughts that I hadn't been able to name up until that moment. So I just put it out there to make myself feel better, and maybe a couple of people would read it and get some insight that they didn't have before."

Gaskins' essay has not only helped advance the dialogue about race relations, but the positive reception has given Gaskins confidence in a scholastic area he has been refining in the few free moments away from medical school studies. Gaskins enjoys creative writing and has dreams of being published. His 2019 degree from the College is in biology with minors in pre-health professions, pre-medicine, psychology and environmental humanities. Since he was also a two-sport athlete, he admits "I wanted to avoid the classes that were going to require a lot of writing." Except he had no choice but to write essays in his first-year seminar class with English professor Chuck Yates, the only class he ever took with Yates. Gaskins said Yates "gave me probably the first C that I ever got on an essay; it might have been a D even." Gaskins will tell you it was the smack of reality he needed to "step up my game" and credits Yates, as he would a great athletics coach, with giving him the tools to become a better writer.

It is that kind of inspiration that led to Gaskins sharing his essay with the public. It was Professor Yates who encouraged him to send it to newspapers such as the Statesman, and even the New York Times. His Facebook post has been shared over 300 times. Published author Chris Farnsworth '93 has reached out to Gaskins to spur him on to more writing.

Gaskins had only met one Black doctor in his time growing up in Idaho, Dr. Ty Waters, who also spoke at the rally at the Idaho statehouse. Gaskins had aspirations to leave Idaho and practice medicine elsewhere. But with the recent developments in race relations and the need for more diversity in states

like Idaho, Gaskins is now planning to return to the Gem State. "I'd like to be for future Black pre-med students what he (Dr. Waters) was to me. I'd like to come back and practice and help out on that front."