Reading EKGs, distinguishing a systolic murmur from a diastolic murmur—not exactly a piece of cake. Every med student is bound to have one class that seems to take a lot more effort than the rest. For Alison DeLuca, MD '04, it was second-year cardiology. I could take a year off, she began to think. Maybe get a master's degree in public health or ethics.

Then she got a call from her adviser, Margaret Ragni, MD '75, professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh. The two had met several times the previous year as part of the Faculty and Students Together (FAST) mentoring program. Every incoming first-year student becomes part of a FAST group consisting of one faculty adviser, four first-year students, and two second-year students who serve as “big sibs.” FAST groups meet occasionally throughout the student’s four years of school. They might gather at their adviser’s home for dinner, carve pumpkins together, or maybe go to a concert to unwind. For several years at Pitt, FAST has given students an instant support network, and, often, a needed recharge, notes Joan Harvey, the associate dean who runs the program.

Ragni’s call came at the beginning of DeLuca’s second year, when the professor was touching base with her FAST mentees. They made plans to have lunch in the hospital cafeteria. When they met, DeLuca told Ragni that she was thinking of getting a master’s. But the prof soon discovered that DeLuca wasn’t so drawn to a degree in public health and ethics as she was ready for a change of pace. Ragni learned her mentee was eager to be in a clinical setting, seeing patients.

Wait until third year, she told the 23-year-old DeLuca. Third year’s going to be great. That reignited the student’s excitement about her future and helped her feel less overwhelmed. They got to talking about DeLuca’s interests in art, literature, and writing. You should read Therese Southgate, said Ragni. DeLuca already did. The two discovered they are both fans of Southgate, a physician who writes a weekly commentary about the art featured on every cover of the Journal of the American Medical Association.

DeLuca revealed that she liked to imagine herself becoming the next Southgate. You can make your career what you want it to be, Ragni said. We’ll find a way to make it work.

Such advice is typical of the encouragement that Ragni gives her FAST mentees. “They just need to believe in themselves,” she says. She’ll share stories from her own life to demonstrate. In her animated voice, she might tell them what happened one Sunday in 1985, when she was a spokesperson for the Pittsburgh blood bank. A television station wanted an interview, and she was at home with her two children, a 4-year-old and an 18-month-old. Since her husband was at work, she packed the children in the car and headed to the blood bank. But her youngest daughter wouldn’t let go of her leg during the interview. The camera crew accommodated, shooting Ragni from the waist up and cropping her clinging child out of the picture.

“The students love to hear stories about how you make it work,” she says.

“The fact that I did what I wanted to do empowers them. They think, ‘Hey, why can’t I also?’”

Ragni’s example has not been lost on DeLuca. She is confident that she will find her niche. “It’s exciting to know there are so many possibilities,” DeLuca says.

And the possibilities keep presenting themselves. DeLuca has been interested in psychiatry for a while; she just discovered a “huge link” between endocrinology and psychiatry.

“That’s my new thing,” she says, with a passion not so unusual for a student unraveling the wonders of the human body.

“I’ve got to let Dr. Ragni know I’m so excited about endocrinology and psychiatry.”

LEARN ON ME
If you enroll in med school at the University of Pittsburgh, your family circle widens. Immediately. As part of the Faculty and Students Together program, med students are adopted in their first month at Pitt by two “big sibs,” more senior students who make sure newbies don’t think they have to go it alone. Alison DeLuca, MD '04, especially appreciated her new sibs during her first year. After a big exam, they would leave treats in her mailbox—homemade chocolate chip cookies, candy, congratulatory notes. And they doled out lots of wisdom and encouragement: Here’s what to concentrate on for the exam. Don’t get stressed. Everyone’s in the same boat. Dr. Schumann is the best! “It’s not so much the academic advice that really matters as the support,” says DeLuca. —EL & DH
SPOCK’S BABY
THE FAMOUS DOC NURTURED PITTSBURGH CHILDREN | BY EDWIN KEISTER JR.

H is Baby and Child Care sold more than 50 million copies; his soothing words on feeding schedules and toilet training reas- sure a whole generation of first-time parents. His name became a household word. Later, Benjamin Spock demonstrated against the Vietnam war, was jailing and convicted of “conspiracy to aid, abet, and counsel” draft avoiders; he avoided the draft after a march at the Pentagon (the conviction was overturned), and quixotically as well as unsuccessfully ran for president and then vice-president. But our chapter in the celebrity doctor’s career is often overlooked: his five formative years as a faculty member at Pitt and the important imprints he left behind. Indeed Spock himself, in his memoir Spock on Spock, never so much as mentions Pittsburgh.

But at the Arsenal Family and Children’s Center in Pittsburgh’s Lawrenceville district, the Spock legacy is by no means forgotten. He founded the center with child-development specialist Margaret McFarland.

“The Arsenal center, a couple of miles away, was one of Spock’s first projects in Pittsburgh. “He believed that the emotional well-being of children was at least as importante as their physical health,” says Keairns, Arsenal’s current director who now occupies the large mahogany desk that Spock occupied in the center in 1951. “And we continue to carry on his focus.”

Spock came to Pitt from the Mayo Clinic as a postgraduate fellow in 1945 after Spock served in the army in 1944. “He chose Lawrenceville because it was to work with families and strengthen the environment in which they did not occur in the first place. And the way to do that was to work with families and strengthen the family environment via a friendly neighborhood center. He chose Lawrenceville because it was compatible with the philosophy and program he had set out to guarantee continuity for the child.”

Keairns says. In its special programs, Arsenal supports “Spock’s baby,” which now trains Duquesne University psychology students. But it still follows its founders’ vision of 50 years ago.

Spock and McFarland were right; the Spock legacy is by no means forgotten. Indeed Spock himself, in his memoir Spock on Spock, new as much as mentions Pittsburgh.

For example, Arsenal continues to carry out Spock and Ekstrom’s idea that play is a child’s most important learning tool. Arsenal’s “play curriculum” tells staff and parents to watch closely children’s play interests and then to furnish materials to enhance those interests. “We had a 3-year-old who was interested in dinosaurs. We furnished picture books, field trips to the Carnegie Museum’s dinosaur collection, et cetera. She paused for emphasis. “It is now an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical University specializing in paleontology.”

In 1955, with booming book sales and a swelling roster of fans, Spock submitted his resignation again; this time it was accepted. After Pitt, Spock became increasingly immersed in national issues, especially the anti-nuclear and antwwar movements. In the turbulent 60s, politicians and other critics blamed his book for a generation raised on “Permissiveness” that was disrespectful of parents. “Spock denied favoring permissiveness,” Keairns says. “But our point of departure always is—what are the children telling us they need?”

“Weि attitude was that we should not wait for emotional problems and then treat them, but develop an atmosphere in which they did not occur in the first place.”