

# All in the Family

BY APRIL WILKERSON

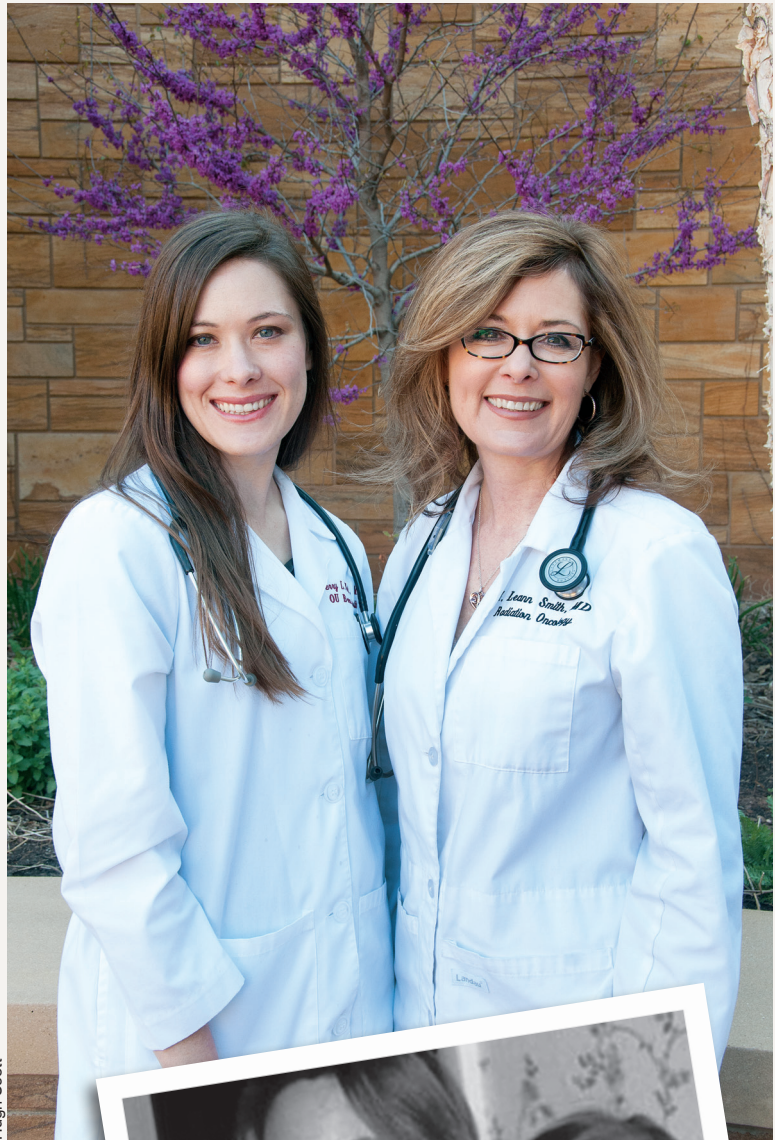
Mothers and daughters go through a lot of experiences together, but medical school is not usually one of them.

Be-coming a physician can be a cherished family legacy—a child watches his or her parent deliver compassionate, skilled care, then follows proudly in those footsteps.

Much more unusual, however, is when parent and child achieve their medical career goals simultaneously. Such is the case of a mother and daughter within the OU College of Medicine, whose bond has only grown stronger as their education has overlapped.

Leann Smith, M.D., and her daughter, Terry Wolf, M.D., graduated from the OU College of Medicine one year apart, in 2007 and 2008 respectively. Today, their medical training continues on campus as Smith works on her second residency and Wolf is completing a fellowship. It has been a journey like no other, as each inspires and supports the other while they immerse themselves in the profound mission of medicine.

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Hugh Scott

Both graduates of the OU College of Medicine, Dr. Terry Wolf, left, and her mother, Dr. Leann Smith, enjoy a break in the Stephenson Cancer Center's healing garden.

Long before they added M.D.s to their names, mom and daughter delight in Terry's first birthday cake.

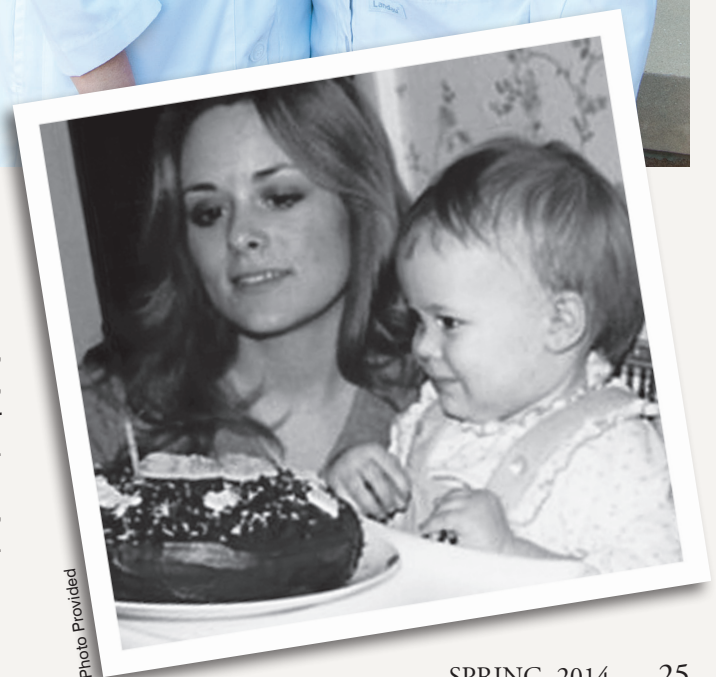
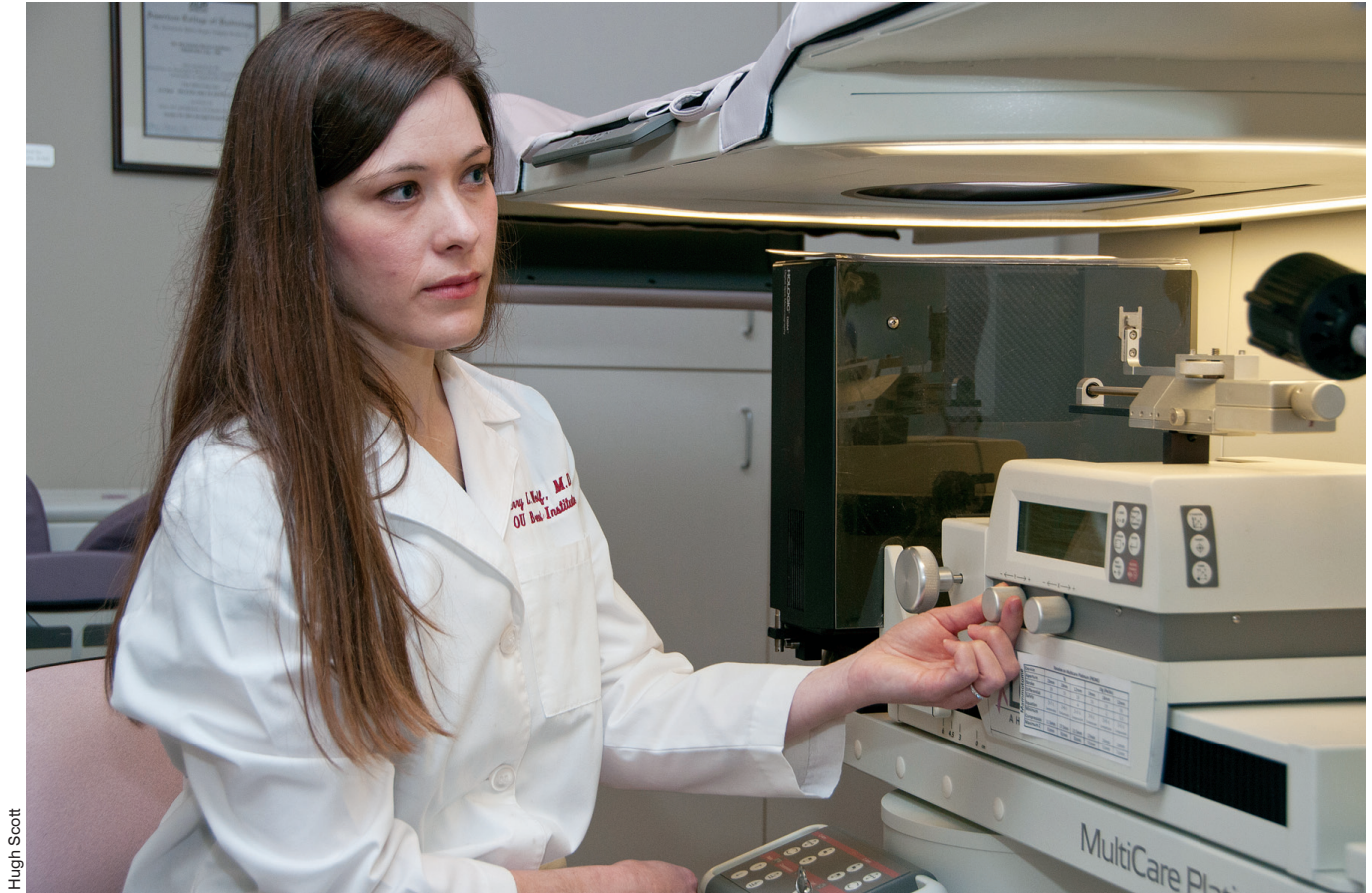


Photo Provided



Hugh Scott

Terry Wolf, M.D., works at a stereotactic biopsy table, which uses X-rays to guide physicians in performing breast biopsies. Wolf and her mother, Leann Smith, M.D., finished OU medical school one year apart and are continuing at HSC as a fellow and resident, respectively.

“There are not many words to describe how proud I am of Terry,” Smith says. “In medical school, I wasn’t a mother; I was Leann. But sometimes I would hear someone behind me in the halls say, ‘Mom!’ To turn around and see that it was my daughter made me very proud.”

That pride is mutual. Wolf’s work ethic and desire to help others was first modeled by her mother. “It was a huge feat for my mother to become a doctor,” Wolf says. “It’s very moving to see all that she’s done and be such a wonderful mother at the same time. Medical school is hard—and she was a mom while she accomplished it all.”

Mother’s and daughter’s aspirations for the profession of medicine have long been in motion. Smith was first a nurse—she completed her nursing education while her daughter was in elementary school, and she worked at Comanche County Hospital in Lawton. Smith says she would intentionally leave her medical books out for her curious young children to peruse, and Wolf

was quick to show interest.

“She was so interested in anatomy and physiology even at a young age,” Smith says. “I remember when she was in second grade, she wanted to bring a cow heart to class for her science project. I think she knew from a very early age that she was interested in medicine.”

Meanwhile, while working as a nurse and raising her two children, Smith had begun thinking of her own possible career as a physician. She loved nursing, but she was also drawn to the physician’s role of diagnosing and caring for patients. She had already completed her nursing degree as a mother, so she thought she could take on the challenge of medical school as well.

When Wolf graduated from high school, the family moved to Norman as she began pursuing her undergraduate degree from OU. Then it wasn’t long before each learned she had been accepted to the OU College of Medicine.

Because of the way medical school is structured, Smith and



Hugh Scott

Leann Smith, M.D., left, and Lacey Allen, a radiation therapist at the Stephenson Cancer Center, are shown with a linear accelerator, which delivers radiotherapy treatments to cancer patients. Smith is doing a residency in radiation oncology at the OU College of Medicine.

Wolf only had one class together although they were just a year apart. However, being on campus together for three of the four years of medical education was invaluable, and it was quite natural for Smith to serve as a mentor to her daughter. She passed along her books with helpful notes in the margins, and she gave advice on arranging schedules. Smith was the first to go through third-year clinical rotations, when students get their initial up-close look at human suffering and realize their opportunity to be a source of knowledge and comfort for patients.

“Compassion is one of the traits that runs through my mom, and it’s something I always remember about her growing up,” Wolf says. “That’s what makes her such a good physician, mom and person.”


After medical school, each began her residency training. Smith’s first residency was in nuclear medicine, and Wolf’s was in radiology. The fields are similar in their use of imaging to diagnose disease. Although they loved their respective fields, each woman also felt a tug to pursue a related specialty that involved more direct patient care. That shift happened quite naturally, without mom and daughter having significant discussions about their career trajectories.

Today Wolf is in the final months of her fellowship in breast imaging, and Smith has two more years left in her second residency in radiation oncology. Both specialties still offer the diagnostic involvement they enjoy, but their additional training will bring them to the patient bedside.

“I’m still going to be reading all kinds of images as a general radiologist, but my niche will be in breast imaging,” Wolf says. “I really enjoy developing relationships with patients. The most moving part of what I do is the empathy I get to experience with patients. Being diagnosed with breast cancer is tough, and it’s a deep emotion that patients experience. Those connections I make with patients are very important and deep connections. It’s difficult sometimes, but I’m glad I get to experience this with my patients.”

Smith’s additional training in radiation oncology is connecting her with patients who are battling many types of cancers. While cancer is still the significant foe in medicine, Smith knows she has found the place she wants to be.

“It’s a privilege to have the knowledge to help patients when they’re at such a devastating time in their lives,” she says. “To be able to guide them after they’ve received a diagnosis, to tell them that we have a plan and that there’s hope, is rewarding. And there are times when we may not have good answers for them, but we can give them comfort and be there with them during their suffering. To share that with patients and families is so rewarding.”

Although their long journey of simultaneous medical training is nearly over, mother and daughter still couldn’t be prouder of each other. Wolf has since married and has her own two children, which has given her renewed respect for her mother’s determination over the years. And Smith still marvels at how her inquisitive toddler has grown into a respected physician who brings both wisdom and kindness to her patients. 

*April Wilkerson is the editor of OU Medicine, the publication of the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine.*