

WALSAA MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Fred Freitag: A Life Shaped by Science, Service, and Connection



Fred Freitag holds fond memories of spinning records as a disc jockey at the Lakeshore Radio Station, serving as a Tripp House Fellow, and making late-night donut runs with friends. A CALS biochemistry major, he also suffered from chronic migraines. A pivotal visit to Health Services changed everything, setting him on a lifelong mission to help others suffering from headache disorders.

Fred completed his UW undergraduate degree in 1975 and attended medical school at Midwestern University Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine. His medical training continued with an internship and residency at Brentwood Hospital, and a fellowship at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. Today, Dr. Freitag is a Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine specializing in Neurology and Headache Medicine at SSM Health/Dean Medical Group in Madison, Wis.

He has served as the primary investigator on more than 200 clinical trials, published over 170 peer-reviewed articles, and holds advanced certifications in Headache Medicine from both the National Headache Foundation and the United Council of Neurological Subspecialties.



Volunteering at Winter Carnival

He believes his CALS degree gave him opportunities that may have been more difficult to find in other places. For example, Dave Nelson, Fred's advisor, recommended he take a dairy science course on the physical chemistry of dairy foods. The class, rooted in macro-structural chemistry, proved unexpectedly valuable and later informed his graduate-level research on serotonin receptor activity.

In four years, Fred completed 134 credits, of which 124 were math and science, including 12 at the graduate level...without summer school.

"I wasn't the brightest bulb in the chandelier. A touch point with a professor in microbiology revolutionized my experience to do well in school. I struggled with her section, so I met with her to find out why I wasn't catching on. She taught me how to use the innate, but hidden skills we all have to learn how to study."

Today, Fred sees about 15 patients a day, four days a week. He is also developing new tools to improve headache care for both pediatric and adult patients, while working closely with physician assistants who share his focus on this specialized field.

His connection to UW remains strong. Fred stays involved through WALSAA, volunteers at Winter Carnival, audits classes, and regularly attends history lectures and biochemistry seminars. He is also a dedicated supporter of Badger Women's Hockey, holding season tickets.

Reflecting on today's students, Fred observes an intensity he both admires and questions. "When I talk with today's biochemistry students, they have such a wide range of interests; usually pursuing two majors along with internships and certificates. I think it's good and bad. I understand why they are doing it — there's tougher competition for graduate programs and medical school. But does this intensity sacrifice the joys of going to college? I hope people in STEM see college as a time for personal growth, not only academic growth, because no matter where you go, you are going to be interacting with other people. If you don't develop the ability to have good conversations and share ideas as a student, it's more difficult to develop that skill as an adult."

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One of his favorite memories reflects that belief. "Even though the football team had losing seasons, we went to the games. One day, while sitting in my dorm room as a freshman, this big dude filled my entire doorway. It was Rufus Ferguson, a Badger running back, who was the first regular season 1,000 Yard Rusher and was drafted by the Atlanta Falcons. We had a good relationship. We could share jokes and serious reflections on being a student at Wisconsin."

Looking back, Fred believes it is the relationships—formed in classrooms, dorm rooms, and unexpected encounters—that give college its lasting meaning. And it is those same human connections that continue to guide his work today.