

When **Nuwan Gunawardhana, M.D.**, began his Internal Medicine residency at the Schmidt College of Medicine, he didn't know anyone in the area. His immediate family was in St. Louis, Missouri, where he was raised.

Flash forward one year, with Dr. Gunawardhana receiving the Milton and Joan Bagley award in recognition of humanistic and compassionate medicine. Transitioning from not knowing anyone to impressing everyone with his warmth and caring within one year is remarkable, but the second-year resident is humble. "I am truly grateful for even being nominated," he said, and he credited the sponsor of the award, the Community Partners Program. "Without their help, we would not be the strong Internal Medicine residency we are today."

The Community Partners Program began in 2015 when FAU launched its first graduate medical education program, a residency in Internal Medicine. Community Partners focuses on easing the transition to Palm Beach County for incoming residents. The group sponsors a yearly picnic to welcome the new residents and introduce them to its members. And that is where Dr. Gunawardhana met Eliot and Michele Popper of Boca Raton, whom he refers to as his "adopted family."

The connection was immediate, according to Dr. Gunawardhana. "We have so much in common – they are very friendly and outgoing and have helped me in so many ways," he said. He shared that the Poppers and their adult children, Drew and Brooke, invited him to their home, introduced him to their friends, recommended local services, and invited him to dinners and other community activities.

"They always reach out during the holidays to make sure I have a place to go." He recently spent the Fourth of July holiday watching the fireworks with them and their friends.

The Poppers attended the recent White Coat ceremony when Dr. Gunawardhana was named the award recipient. "I was so glad they were there – they are truly a second family to me. I know I can always text or call them; they are always there for me," he said. "I have made lifelong friends."

This relationship has not only positively affected his residency experience, but it has made Dr. Gunawardhana seriously look at the Boca Raton area as a place to practice medicine. "This program has really helped me know the people who live here," he said. "I really enjoy Boca Raton and would be very happy to live and practice in the community after my residency." He is planning to specialize in critical care in a hospital setting.

The Community Partners Program is a unique resource for the residents and truly appreciated by all, according to **Lee Learman, M.D., Ph.D.**, senior associate dean for Graduate Medical Education. He noted that four additional residency programs have been added in the last three years, and Community Partners has accommodated the increased number of residents.

"The Community Partners' heartwarming investment of time and energy sends a very strong message to our residents about what the community values most in their physicians: humanism, compassion, and dedication to patient-centered care," Dr. Learman said. "The Community Partners Program supports our residents' well-being during a particularly challenging stage of their education, and fosters retention of our graduates in Palm Beach County after residency. I deeply appreciate their meaningful and groundbreaking work!" he added.