was thrilled, honored, and speechless,” says Grace Chang, MD ’82, MPH, describing her reaction to the news that she would receive the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School Alumni Association’s 2013 Distinguished Alumni Award.

Dr. Chang has served on the faculty of the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School since 1991 and was appointed a full professor in 2009. She is director of addictions psychiatry for the inpatient and residential programs at the Boston Veterans Administration Healthcare System (affiliated with both Harvard and Boston University Medical Schools). She previously served for 20 years as an associate physician in psychiatry at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital. “I have returned to my roots in public psychiatry,” says Dr. Chang. “It is timely for me to contribute to improving the care of our veterans.”

Dr. Chang is widely recognized for her achievements in developing and implementing screening and interventions for alcohol abuse. In addition, she has been honored as a teacher and mentor and for her success in advancing the field of psychiatry associated with stem cell transplantation. Still, she says, the Distinguished Alumni Award stands out among these honors as one of the most meaningful, in part because it shows how much the medical school appreciates its graduates.

As an undergraduate at Yale University, Dr. Chang initially planned to major in either French or English. But she changed her major to molecular biophysics and biochemistry in her junior year and graduated cum laude, after taking “Politics, Policy, and History of Health” at the Yale School of Public Health. When she was accepted by her in-state school, Rutgers Medical School, she was delighted.

The medical school was very clear about its mission: the focus was on the students,” says Dr. Chang. “We were its primary product, and the faculty took great care in educating each student, preparing us for our subsequent profession.” She recalls that Stanley Bergen Jr., MD, then president, UMDNJ, was the attending physician on the medicine service when she was a student and came daily from his office in Newark to teach and lead clinical rounds. Marie Trontell, MD ’76, stands out in Dr. Chang’s memory as “embodying clinical excellence.”

Students took care of one another, too. Kevin Vitting, MD ’82, now a leading New Jersey nephrologist, was “generous and considerate; he exemplified the spirit of the school,” she says. “‘Vitting’s General Store’—his desk in the Kessler Teaching Laboratories—‘was stocked with complimentary Oreos, M&Ms, peanuts, instant coffee, and Tylenol, whatever a medical student might need to get through the day, to study right, and do well.”
“My class included several very distinguished psychiatrists,” says Dr. Chang, mentioning two in particular: Henry Kranzler, MD ’82, professor of psychiatry, Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania, who is now concentrating on clinical research in the field of addictions; and Richard Friedman, MD ’82, professor of clinical psychiatry, director, Psychopharmacology Clinic at Weill Cornell Medical College, and a regular columnist for the science section of the New York Times.

Dr. Friedman was Dr. Chang’s laboratory and venipuncture partner in the first year, and they shared a love of Charles Dickens and the characters and social themes of Dickens’s last completed novel, Our Mutual Friend. Recalling Dr. Chang, Dr. Friedman says, “It’s so wonderful that the medical school has recognized her with this award. She was so smart and so kind—serious but with a playful side. Nonjudgmental and noncompetitive, she would never look for accolades or attention.”

Addiction and Transplantation Psychiatry

At Rutgers Medical School, recalls Dr. Chang, clinical rotations in psychiatry emphasized addiction, sparking an interest that became the focus of her career. That interest expanded at the Yale University School of Medicine, where she completed her residency and served as chief resident. By the end of her residency, she had defined her research goal: to develop better screening and intervention techniques for alcohol problems, with an emphasis on identifying and moderating prenatal alcohol use. Ideally, screening and intervention would take place in mainstream clinical settings: general medical clinics, general and specialty obstetric practices, and emergency rooms.

Dr. Chang believes that her first forays into clinical research at Rutgers Medical School were an important factor in her being awarded a subsequent Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholar Fellowship at Yale University (after residency training in general adult psychiatry), which prepared her for a career in academic medicine.

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