

# URGO Alumnus Spotlight

## Ben Darwitz '20



Ben Darwitz '20 is in his first rotation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as part of the Biological & Biomedical Sciences Program. He credits his past health issues as well as his experience with Augsburg's Dr. Jennifer Bankers-Fulbright (Dr. B) as inspiration for pursuing a Ph.D.

When Ben was 20 years old, he was diagnosed with kidney failure, and at age 22, he was fortunate enough to receive a kidney transplant. As a first-generation college student, he didn't know much about higher education, but his experiences at Augsburg awakened a desire to learn more about biology.

After getting his AA degree, he looked for a four-year college to pursue a bachelor's degree in biology. He heard positive reviews of Augsburg's biology department, and liked the small class sizes, so he applied.

He had taken a microbiology course at the community college, and really enjoyed the material. This inspired him to enroll in a microbiology class, led by Dr. B, where he learned first about URGO.

"I joined URGO after begging Dr. B to let me work with her over the summer," says Ben. "Dr. B does a lot of work in immunology and microbiology, which is exactly what I want to focus on in my future career."

After being admitted into URGO, he received research funding from Augsburg regent and alumnus Terry Lindstrom '73. Working with classmate Daniella Vasquez, the pair studied how airway epithelial cell secretions impact opportunistic pathogens that normally infect cystic fibrosis patient lungs.

Ben really enjoyed working on the project and working with the professors, especially outside the typical classroom setting.

"Augsburg and URGO teach you how to be a scientist," says Ben. "Augsburg mentors are teachers first, principal investigators second. They give students a quality research experience by teaching you to think as a scientist. URGO provides you experience that you are able to take with you to graduate school, medical school, and future jobs. Augsburg might not have millions of dollars to fund ground-breaking research, but they have fantastic and dedicated teachers who know how to guide students, which is extremely important for career development."

The summer after graduation, Ben worked at the NIH through their Postbaccalaureate IRTA program. His position was different from typical student positions as it was mostly involved with sample analysis and processing.

"I worked with really cool organisms, such as SARS-CoV-2, malaria, and select agents. I participated in analyzing gene expression and sequencing different organisms by utilizing a wide variety of genomic techniques. It was really fun!"

He is excited to be in the Biological & Biomedical Science Program as a bacteriologist. Ben expects to graduate in 2026 and is looking forward to working alongside the professors and scientists at UNC. But he has a bit of nostalgia for his time at Augsburg.

"Dr. B was a fantastic mentor - the best I'll ever have. I won't get that kind of mentorship experience again!"

