

ST. PAUL

THE MAYO SISTERS



University of St. Thomas students Kaija, left, and Melija Vijums are pictured this week on the school's St. Paul campus. The identical twin sisters from Roseville will graduate Saturday, part of the inaugural class of the university's new four-year undergraduate nursing program. Both siblings will join the oncology unit of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. **BRANDON WOLLER — UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**

The famed Rochester clinic is the next step for Roseville identical twins graduating today from the University of St. Thomas' new nursing school

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The Vijums twins, Kaija and Melija, were co-captains of their Roseville Area High School lacrosse team. They worked together for five years coaching 11-year-olds in volleyball. And this week, they'll graduate side by side as part of the first-ever four-year nursing degree cohort at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul.

For most of four years, the two

have shared a car while living, studying and taking almost every college class together, including minoring in theology. Naturally, they'll also take their first steps into the workforce together this summer, joining the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

For the Vijumses, it's been a journey into medicine defined by a single word: twinning. The "j" in both their first and last names is pronounced like a y, an onomastic inheritance from their Latvian grandmother, one of many quirks,

traits and challenges they've shared across their 21 years.

"Our resumes are identical," explained Kaija, who calls her sister "Moe," a shortened form of her middle name, Monet.

"Same ACT score," added Melija, who calls her sister "Kai."

"On paper, we're the same person, but once you get to know us, we're different," explained Kaija, who went on to describe her sister as being "a little more spicy" and extroverted.

"I'll speak my mind, for sure,"

Melija said.

SIBLINGS INSPIRED TO GO INTO NURSING

Over coffee at the Black Coffee and Waffle Bar in St. Paul, Kaija explained she was inspired to go into nursing by the identical twins' shared near-death experience in the womb.

The pair barely survived twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome, which involves uneven blood flow

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from the placenta.

Weighing just 2 pounds, Kaija was put into a medically induced coma and placed in the neonatal intensive care unit, an experience made bearable for her mother by the warm encouragement of a kindly nurse.

She said she hopes to be equally holistic in the care she provides her patients, a “whole person” approach she said her instructors at St. Thomas were adept at emphasizing.

“We go into this profes-

sion wanting to help people,” said Kaija, who previously completed 80 of her 480 hours of clinical rotations in Mayo’s pediatrics unit. “It’s ‘Let met get to know you’ and ‘How can I support you,’ instead of ‘How can I fix you?’”

Melija’s interest in nursing was piqued by her mother’s fight against Stage 3 breast cancer when the twins were 10. Their mother has been cancer-free for 12 years.

“Nursing kind of describes who I am,” Melija said. “Being able to make a difference in someone’s life, even a little, giving hope to someone, I think that’s huge.”

FIRST GRADUATES OF NURSING PROGRAM

The Morrison Family College of Health enrolled its first 50 graduate and 50 undergraduate nursing students in fall 2022, making the twins pioneers of sorts for its Susan S. Morrison School of Nursing’s focus on community health equity. The four-year bachelor of science in nursing program has since grown, and will enroll 125 students in the fall. The two-year accelerated master’s program also has added a three-year hybrid option for working professionals.

To fulfill their general

education language requirement, the Vijums twins took American Sign Language and tackled other courses sitting across from each other in study rooms on campus, where whiteboards were their confidantes.

“I always say that I couldn’t have done it without her,” Melija said. “Nursing is hard. We’re always studying together, and it’s always a good push. ...”

“The competition,” interjected Kaija. “And just having somebody to confide in and talk to.”

‘PUT TWO AND TWO TOGETHER’

Eager for experience, the 21-year-old twins traveled to Athens, Greece, last winter to shadow surgeons through an eight-person Atlantis study abroad program.

Around 9 a.m. on a January day in Greece, against the backdrop of a Minnesota sunset, the pair completed online interviews — separately — with two different recruiters from the Mayo Clinic. The interviewers quickly “put two and two together,” said the twins, speaking in unison.

Twin job offers soon followed, and the Vijumses

elected to work in the same area of patient care.

The women were scheduled to attend a pinning ceremony for graduating nurses on Thursday, march through the venerated St. Thomas arches Friday and receive their diplomas Saturday, before relocating this summer to separate residences within the same apartment complex in Rochester.

In July, both will join the Mayo Clinic’s yearlong training program for new graduates, where they’ve opted for placements in the oncology unit serving cancer patients — perhaps not side by side, but close enough.