

2017 WHITE COAT CEREMONY

Mount Sinai Students and their Mentors are a Powerful Innovative Force for Good

Dennis S. Charney, MD, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Dean of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and President for Academic Affairs of the Mount Sinai Health System, delivered the following remarks at the 20th Annual White Coat Ceremony on September 18, 2017, in Stern Auditorium.

The White Coat Ceremony marks the beginning of the academic year and welcomes first-year students into the medical profession. As students are helped into their white coats by faculty, they are reminded of the significance of their profession and their responsibility to balance scientific knowledge with compassion.

Welcome to our annual White Coat Ceremony.

For the past 11 years, every September, I have stood at this podium to welcome a new group of fresh-faced individuals to the medical profession. In preparing my remarks, I must step back from the noise of the workaday world to reflect on what it means to don the white coat and join the order of physicians.

Why do we have this ceremony? As you will notice, when you put on this coat and wrap the stethoscope around your neck, something changes in you. It's subtle. Did it make you smarter? No, sorry. Better looking? No, again, sorry.

As I will highlight in a few moments, this class has researchers, musicians, artists, athletes, veterans – individuals who have all played valuable roles in their communities. When they put the white coat on, they will not cease to be these things.

Yet ... when you don the white coat, something will change.

What will it be?

Across time, across cultures, powerful symbols have always been a part of medicine. Today, this symbol is The White Coat, and while the symbols themselves may change, the ideas and traditions they represent do not. One such defining tradition of the medical profession, passed down from Hippocratic times, is mentorship. Class of 2021, donning the white coat does not symbolize your induction into a class of elite academics. Rather, it symbolizes the start of an apprenticeship. You will learn a timeless trade that will allow you to watch over the health of your communities.

It is our responsibility to mentor you to practice this scientific art with humility and honor. This ceremony, therefore, represents the beginning of a bonding process, a mentorship experience, a partnership with the Mount Sinai Family... a relationship that will last not just the 4 years of medical school, but a lifetime.

There are two halves to this bond – the mentors, and the mentees. Let us talk about the mentees for a few moments. The men and women of the Class of 2021, I know you have it in you to become the leaders of our profession and the world at large. To be sure, you come to Mount Sinai from top undergraduate colleges and universities and have mean GPA and MCAT scores as high as any other students in the nation. But you are much more than that. It is not the academic accolades that convince me you have it in you to change the world. It is the fire in your eyes I see today that lets me know we are in capable hands.

Family, friends, and colleagues, let me introduce you to some of the Class of 2021, whose accomplishments go beyond their commitment to medicine, but reveals the content of their character and unique talents.

Let me emphasize, these are just some examples –

- One student grew up in Carver Houses, the public housing complex - across the street from Mount Sinai. Her mother passed away at Mount Sinai. I quote "I think it's both a privilege to go to a place that felt somewhat inaccessible because of my background and very personal because of my mother."

For her, it was a short walk across the street, but a long road to get here! She is an inspiration!

- Another student wrote "... I picked up the violin at age four, and had voice lessons at age twelve." She was discovered to have perfect pitch, which allowed her to "...act as a 'human pitch pipe' for friends and colleagues in various musical groups." Perfect Pitch – I need to know more about singing – I thought a perfect pitch was a 100mph Fast Ball!
- We have a Marine in the Class who was "... inspired to become a physician from a desire to provide care for veterans." those who have kept us safe.
- Another student was President of her university's Social Justice Medicine Group, who devised novel approaches to address healthcare inequality.
- A member of the Class of 2021 claims he can solve a 5 by 5 Rubik's cube. I am not sure exactly what that means... but I think you have to be smart!
- We have a number of athletes in the Class of 2021 –
 - o An ultramarathon runner, who has competed in races up to 100 miles,
 - o NCAA Division 1 athletes who competed in hockey, fencing and track and field
 - o And an avid sailor and a USCG captain who has sailed 1/3 of the way around the world.... And wants to complete the circumnavigation
- Many religions are represented –
 - o One student was a pastor at his church for 7 years
 - o Another spent two years working and teaching as a rabbi
- Finally, and this is a student I really need to get to know...as Dean of the School who just completed a new 5-year Strategic Plan which is the basis of a new Capital Campaign
 - o Among her many talents (and there are many!), she worked as a part time fortune teller

The list could go on indefinitely. Despite all these accomplishments, there is one thing the Class of 2021 has not yet achieved. They are not doctors!

That is where we, your mentors, come in.

Yes, the Class of 2021 has the potential for greatness. However, as Winston Churchill said,

“The Price of Greatness is Responsibility”

We challenge you to use your abilities not just to be a participant, but as a creative force for good.

Your medical school is at the forefront of biomedical research and clinical care. For example, the world’s leading life science journal, Nature, just last month ranked the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai 10th among institutions in the world for innovative research. US News and World Report placed Mount Sinai Hospital on the Honor Roll based upon the ranking of over 5,000 hospitals.

Yet, despite all the advances at Mount Sinai and other top medical centers that have emerged during my lifetime, let me be the first to tell you that, despite what you may read in the newspaper, we are NOT living in the future. Let me give you just a few examples of what does not exist TODAY, as you enter medical school.

- DNA sequencing and other high-throughput technologies are identifying the genetic underpinnings of an increasing number of illnesses. The question is, are these findings being translated to clinical practice?
 - o For many conditions, such as Huntington’s disease, we have known the causal gene for decades yet there are ZERO effective treatments.
 - o Precision Medicine has not reached its potential to prevent human disease and discover new treatments.
 - o CLASS OF 2021, YOU MUST MAKE SCIENTIFIC BREAKTHROUGHS CLINICALLY RELEVANT!
- Our understanding of the brain is in its infancy.
 - o The tragedy of mental illness and substance abuse remains unsolved.
 - o As memories seep away in dementing illnesses like Alzheimer’s disease, there are ZERO treatments capable of bringing them back.
 - o When the brain is damaged by stroke, there are ZERO treatments capable of regenerating brain tissue.
 - o CLASS OF 2021, YOU NEED TO FIGURE OUT THE HUMAN BRAIN!
- There are far too few curative treatments for Cancer.
 - o For patients with Breast and Prostate Cancer which has spread, new cancer treatments are badly needed NOW.
 - o CLASS OF 2021, YOU NEED TO CURE THE MOST COMMON CANCERS!

There is so much work to be done!

It is to your generation, therefore, that we now turn, to guide us towards a NEW Age of Insight and Discovery.

And, it is our job, your teachers to guide you.

Your Mount Sinai mentors will allow you to stand on their shoulders. They will open doors for you to worlds previously unseen and unknown; they will be your eyes and ears into the future. Together you will chart the course.

And, through a rich mentoring relationship you will have someone to check in with, throughout your career. (I have had that experience.)

One of the most acclaimed teacher-student relationships was that between Helen Keller (who was deaf, blind, and mute) and her teacher Anne Sullivan.

The most important moment in their lives was when Helen Keller made the connection between the spelled out word water and water gushing from a pump.

“As the cool water gushed over one hand, [my teacher] spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly...Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten -- a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me... That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free...For the first time I longed for a new day to come.” – Helen Keller

“My heart is singing for joy this morning! A miracle has happened! The light of understanding has shone upon my pupil’s mind, and behold all things are changed.” – Anne Sullivan

What a moment for teacher and student!

To the Class of 2021 and your mentors, I predict that together you will experience such life altering moments. Some of you will save a person’s life. And others will make a discovery that will help many, if not, millions of people. We all come into medicine dreaming of such moments, and you will find that they do not happen often. Not every day will bring the thrill of discovering water. But these days do come, these moments do exist, and one such dream fulfilled WILL alter your perspective forever.

Since we are on the topic of dreams, let’s discuss Dreamers. Six Mount Sinai medical students, including two in the Class of 2021 have DACA status. Let me affirm Mount Sinai’s full support for all such individuals. We intend to do what we can, to protect their rights, including the following:

- We will not treat medical or graduate school applications of undocumented students any differently than those of students who are United States citizens or permanent residents.
- If the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) policy is terminated or substantially curtailed, we pledge to continue providing financial aid and other support to our undocumented students, regardless of their immigration status.
- And we will put protections in place for our students consistent with the rich tradition of Mount Sinai as a “house of noble deeds,” which was established over 150 years ago to protect and care for our city’s neediest citizens, and continues to do so to this day.

Yes, there are 2 individuals in this class with DACA status, but all of us in this room – students, families, mentors – are Dreamers.

The times demand that we DREAM BIG

Together, as partners, we can achieve greatness and ease the suffering of our communities. The stakes are as high as ever. What we need is a group of dreamers to rise against the tide of history and believe it is possible to succeed where generations past have fallen short. You have many medical facts to memorize and learn, but do not forget to let your imagination run wild, to seek solutions to the most difficult problems we face as a people.

And when your idealism is met with skepticism, remember that every current reality started off as an idea in the head of some Dreamer who stayed the course.

“20 years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.” – Mark Twain

THANK YOU.