KERN NATIONAL NETWORK
FOR CARING & CHARACTER IN MEDICINE

What Character Means to Me

by Monica Gobrial, M2, Medical College of Wisconsin

The KNN Faculty Development Workgroup is working on a funded project from the Kern National Network for Caring & Character in Medicine on Educating Character in Medicine.

As part of this project, medical students at three schools—the Medical College of Wisconsin, Dell Medical School at The University of Texas at Austin and the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health—participated in a character essay contest, "Finding Inspiration: Character Exemplars." This contest prompted students to reflect on the definition of character and a character exemplar.

Winning essays will be published in this and future issues of the KNN Connection. Monica Gobrial, M2 from the Medical College of Wisconsin, was the first winner of this contest. Below is her essay:



Aside from the glaring sun arrowed through the fresh paradise-green crinkle of the leaves, gleaming the sea-blue tint of the lake, few things reminded me that it was summer. Unlike previous summers, there wasn't much I had to look forward to, but the release of *Hamilton* was certainty a notable exception. One line, in particular, is blasting in my ears at this very moment.

> *"You have no control who lives, who dies, who tells your story."*

As I sit here, I can't help but think about how unaware this person is of the story I'm about to tell or even of me and yet I, like many others, have been heavily impacted by his presence.

> *"You know, he is usually the first one there and the last one to leave."*
>
> *"Wow you are working with him? You struck the lottery."*
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> *"I'll let you in on a little secret, neurologists and neurosurgeons don't always get along, but everyone loves him, he is well respected in every department."*
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> *"I must have sent maybe like fifty emails to try to do research and most people ignored me right? But he responded pretty quickly. I thought I was talking to his secretary or something, I had no idea I was speaking with the head of the department."*

These are just a few of the numerous tidbits I still recall from three years ago when I was an undergraduate student working on a summer research project in the Department of Neurosurgery at a different institution prior to coming to MCW. At first, I attributed the adulations to his prestige as chair. It didn't truly strike me as peculiar until the mere mention of his name would instantaneously come with smiles and stories, but it took time for me to understand why that is.

Every week, he met with the research team which, for the time being, included me. I thought I was just there for courtesy; however, to my surprise, he'd devote special attention to try to make sure I understood the inner workings of the lab. I began seeing why praise was warranted, but it wasn't until I met with him personally to get advice, that it all clicked.

His office was filled with more pictures than I could count, with his trips to places in Africa and South America. He saw me notice them and said, "This is why I value research so much, because I could go downstairs and do surgeries until I was blue in the face, but it doesn't mean anything if I can't find a cure for them," and he followed it up with, "Did you know that, soon, stroke is going to be the number one leading cause of death in these countries?" and I have kept those words with me since.

It wasn't how good of a surgeon he was, nor his 200+ research publications nor his title as chair of the department. It's not how much his patients loved him nor how much students revered him. It's not that he spent his vacations doing more surgeries in Africa and South America. It's not that the president of one of those countries opened a hospital there simply because he promised to partner with them. It's not that everyone around him spoke highly of him. But… it is why all of those things are true. He said it best, "I have not worked a day in my life since the day I decided to leave the loading docks."

This, to me, is someone who exemplifies character. With all grace and humility, he accepted the calling of a physician, not as an occupation or a prestige of sorts, but as a way of life and of being. He doesn't feel like what he does is "work." His legacy is a reflection of who he is, not what he does. To anyone who doesn't know him, he might be the model *curriculum vitae*. But to the rest of us, the Latin meaning carries weight. To his colleagues and patients, he is a great physician but an even better person. To his students, he is the best teacher around. To his team, he is the first there and the last to leave. And to me, he is the person I hope to become. ■