

## White Coat Ceremony 2017

Michelle S. Barratt, MD, MPH

I want to thank all of the friends and family of our new medical students for coming this evening. It is with your support and encouragement that these students have made it here tonight. Welcome to the class of 2021! You are embarking on a journey of learning. If I did my math correctly last night, you are the 48<sup>th</sup> class to enter medical school at what is now known as UTHealth/McGovern Medical School as the first class of just 19 students began their coursework in 1970. Your medical school has much to offer with faculty that care about medical education and the well-being of medical students and residents. You are entering a conducive environment to learn and grow.

I have a few pointers that pertain not just to your four years with us at UTHealth/McGovern Medical school but to your lifelong career as a physician. You have all come to medical school with a life story and a passion for a variety of things. Do not forget your story and do not abandon your passions! My story began as the daughter of a family physician. My dad was born in a wheat field in Saskatchewan to illiterate peasants and went to a one room schoolhouse with 9 grades under one teacher. One of these teachers was Mrs. Thirsk, an English immigrant to Canada teaching grammar, spelling, math and all the other subjects to the children of a community of Ukrainian immigrants. After high school, he picked berries and taught school for a year to earn his way through University and paid for medical school by owing service to the province he trained in. Believe it or not, I fondly remember Sunday dinners at the hospital when my dad returned to further training as a resident in Pathology after completing his med school pay back. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized those buffet meals at his hospital were a way for my mom and dad to save money since he was making only a few dollars a week. Fast forward to fourth grade and I boldly proclaimed to my friend's mother that I wanted to teach school when I grew up. I don't recall her exact words but the message I received was not supportive of my plan: You don't have the patience to be a teacher. So I quickly moved to plan B, I would take care of sick children and be a Pediatrician. My fourth grade self did not realize I was committing to being a doctor like my dad and both my mom and dad tried to talk me out of it as I was planning for college at 17 and still wanted be a

Pediatrician and now even I knew that meant medical school. I had learned some things from my parents though. I had observed both my mom, a nurse, and my dad, the doctor, caring for their fellow human beings. Some of you are like my dad and are the first in your family to complete a college degree and you will also be first to be doctor. Some of you like me, have a physician role model in your family. Either way, you are now on the path to an honored and esteemed profession. UTHealth/McGovern Medical school chose you for qualities that go beyond good grades and MCAT scores. You were chosen for your ability to communicate and for your volunteer work. You were chosen for experiences in research labs or clinical settings. You were chosen because we believe you have what is needed to be an excellent and caring physician.

I have been faculty at UTHealth/McGovern Medical school for 26 years. I am proud of our campus and our graduates. I have watched as your predecessors have worked to make the place better than when they found it from starting new student clubs and blue book elective courses to volunteer work, global health trips and research. Look around you and you will find ways to contribute. You all have heard medical school is like drinking your learning from a fire hydrant. That may well be, but I would assert that as you progress in learning you must also hold onto those things that bring you personal joy be it music, sports or other creative expression. Identify your core values and take time to hold onto them. When I was a medical student I played piano to relieve my stress and was fortunate to have a Christian Fellowship group on our campus that met weekly with songs and sharing. I loved sitting and listening to my patients. Don't tell anyone, but I struggled at times with the academics and ended up failing my midterm in pharmacology in the fall of my second year of medical school. Some of you may also find parts of the medical school curriculum particularly challenging. The good news is you have lots of resources and like me can seek peer tutors to pull you up from that low grade. I learned long after medical school about a phenomenon known as Imposter Syndrome. I occasionally have short bouts of this illness before I let my friends and family remind me otherwise. Imposter syndrome is that collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success. **Imposters** suffer from self-doubt and a sense of intellectual fraudulence that override any feelings of success or external proof of their competence. Please believe me when I tell you that you have the "right stuff". Please seek out helpers when you feel imposter syndrome infecting you and

overriding your true ability. While I do not want you to fall prey to imposter syndrome, I do need to assure you that you remain human as a physician and therefore you will make mistakes. I pray that your mistakes are small or inconsequential to the health and well-being of your patients. Be gentle to yourself when you realize you have made a mistake and strive to learn from it and perhaps create a safety net to help someone else avoid a similar experience. A large percentage of you are perfectionists. Despite this leaning, you will never have an ideal day. Just because the day is not ideal though does not mean the day was not worthwhile. Look everyday for three things. I learned this from Dr. Rachel Remen the founder of The Healer's Art which is an elective you all can take in your Winter quarter (this is a shameless plug for the Healer's Art course which I co-direct). The instructions are to review your day backwards three times. Review your day backward like a movie and look for the first memory that answers the first question "What surprised me today?" Stop and write it down. Restart the rewind of your day until you reach the answer to "What moved me or touched my heart today?" Stop and write it down. Restart the rewind of your day until you have the answer to "What inspired me today?" Stop and write it down. As you do this exercise over a few weeks, you start recognizing the surprises, heart touching experiences and inspired events **WHEN THEY HAPPEN**. It is life giving when you feel overwhelmed.

I went to medical school about 2000 miles from where my parents and siblings still live. I had to work to make friends and my classmates are still some of the closest people in my life. One of my classmate's parents lived in the suburbs by our medical school and would host their daughter's classmates at their family dinners for Thanksgiving and other times. When our first child was born during my husband and my final year of residency, they became her "Grandfriends" and she went from being a breast milk only baby at the age of 6 months to eating mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes with marshmallows and pumpkin pie with vanilla ice cream all in one day at her first Thanksgiving (yes, I was on-call and not there to intervene—she loved everything and is a foodie to this day). Please take time to get to know the other members of your class. You might not be fortunate enough to inherit grandfriends but your classmates will buoy your spirits and offer diversions when you need them. For those parents and friends in the audience, you can help out by joining the Organization of Parents and Friends and volunteering for special events like BurnOut Dinners during finals. Another

important reminder for you, Class of 2021, is to talk to these friends and family on a regular basis. It is easier today than when I was in medical school—no long distance telephone charges if you use your cell phone and you can even do facetime or skype so you can see the faces of your loved ones as you talk.

I alluded to my husband being a resident. I kind of lost my storyline but just to back up I attended my state university with a biology degree and married my now 36 year life partner Michael Barratt the end of our senior year. We attended medical school as a married couple as well as residency when we started adding children to our family. He studied Internal Medicine while I studied Pediatrics. After that first child at the end of residency, we added one more homegrown then 3 handpicked, my favorite term for our children added by adoption. They have grown up and we now parent 4 adult children plus a daughter in law and have just our 16 yo still living at home. Our adopted children come from India (2) and Houston (1). We look a little bit like the United Nations when we all hang out. I love UTHealth/McGovern Medical school for its diversity and inclusion. Houston itself was declared the most ethnically diverse metropolitan area in the U.S. so as students in our medical school you will have lots of different cultures and ethnicities to learn about from your patients and your colleagues. I trust you to be respectful of the differences you encounter. I love and respect my husband but God has definitely given us different skills, talents and styles. When I think about the things that people do when they are stressed there are many possible actions. Please avoid the unhealthy ones like too much alcohol. You already heard I hang out with friends and play piano to alleviate my stress. When I quizzed my husband about this last week he voted on exercise, reading, working on his sailboat and working on his textbook. He also made a plea for healthy eating and to take time to poop everyday (yes, I said poop, it's the Pediatrician in me!). So in summary, Class of 2021 Welcome to the beginning of an exciting profession. You are lifelong learners already known for your academic undergrad achievements. You are now classmates with an incredibly diverse and inspiring group. Help one another. Become friends. Tutor those that struggle in what you are good at and find a tutor good at what you struggle at. Identify your core values and follow them in what you spend your free time on. Follow your passions and take a few electives. As for me, I may not have had the patience in 4<sup>th</sup> grade to teach elementary students but I have the passion to teach medical students and residents and my original declaration is now known to be achieved as I have earned the

Regents Outstanding Teacher Award in 2014 and was humbled to receive the Humanism in Medicine award this year. Do not succumb to Imposter Syndrome but believe in yourself and those in your class. I am proud to have been given the honor of welcoming you and wish you well. I look forward to hearing your stories and learning about your passions in the next four years. Thank you again to the family and friends who have supported you to get here and will continue with you for this next step of your journey to caring for your fellow human beings. Strive to be your best self. CONGRATULATIONS.