White Coat Ceremony Speaker

Northeastern University PA Program, August 2014

Speaker: Erin Sharaf

Friends, families, honored guests, class of 2015.

I am thrilled to be here with you tonight. It feels right to honor and celebrate you for all of the hard work and the countless hours you’ve put in over the past year to become the best health care providers you can be. I know that some of you, perhaps all of you, might be nervous about starting your rotations. Every year, I hear students say things like, “What if I don’t know enough” or “What if I’m I’m not ready”

I want to assure you that you’re part of a long legacy of Northeastern PA students who have felt exactly the same way and sat here asking the exact same questions, and who then went out and proceeded to blow their own minds with all they were capable of. You will be no different. You were chosen over 800 other applicants for very good reasons. There were no mistakes. You were chosen not just because of your stellar transcripts and your clinical hours; almost everyone has those. What set you apart was something that can’t be taught. It is a heart that desires to be of service as a healer. It is this innate quality that leads to some of the magical things that will happen during the clinical year; such as you being the one person on the team who goes the extra mile to find that little detail that makes all the difference in the care of the patient. It is this desire to truly serve that results in the Northeastern PA student being the one hand the patient wants to hold during their most difficult moments. It is this inner drive that results in the Northeastern PA student making a diagnosis that even the senior attending missed. It is the inner fortitude that leads to the NU PA student being invited to first assist even above medical students and residents from a prestigious institution just across the Charles. Inevitably, it is the Northeastern PA student that is so impressive, they inspire their preceptor to pick up the phone to call me and say things like “I don’t get it. How are they so good when they’re only students.”

Next year will be full of challenges and opportunities, but each and every one of you is up to the task. You will work very hard and continue to refine your diagnostic skills, but the rewards will be tremendous. You will touch lives and you will be touched. You will stretch and grow and accomplish things that maybe you never even thought possible. You will be blessed to be able to be of service to others in some of the most intimate times of their lives such as births and deaths and there is no greater privilege.

You will have days where you think, “yeah, I’ve got this” and the very next day you’ll think, “there’s no way I’ve got this”. Just know, that that’s exactly how the clinical year goes and you’re right where you’re supposed to be. And on those days when you feel that your medical knowledge or recall isn’t quite what you’d like it to be…know that you always have something of value to offer the patient in front of you: your kind attention, presence and deep listening.

The white coat is powerful symbol and once you put it on, patients will look to you for advice, wisdom and comfort. You may not notice your power at first and you might not feel powerful but the implication is there. Be careful to not let your powerful white coat become a barrier you hide behind or something that comes between you and the patient. True healing can only come from deep connection. Remember, we talked about the difference between helping, fixing and serving. Helping and fixing come from the ego; from a power differential; from judgment that something or someone is broken and they need you to fix them. Serving comes from honoring the inherent wholeness in the person sitting across from you, no matter what their chart says and recognizing that they are also offering you a gift, by telling you their most intimate details, sharing their life with you and allowing you to walk a few steps with them along the path. Consider letting the next year, or maybe the next few decades, feel like one big sharing of gifts, a constant dance of giving and receiving the things that really matter, and I promise you, it will all work out fine.

I will be rooting for you always and believing in you and I look forward to the day one short year from now when you’ll be graduating and you’ll be looking back in amazement at all the incredible things that happened during the clinical year. And I will be thrilled to call you a colleague.

Thank you.