

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

On Mentors and Mentality

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Four off-white walls stared back at me as I sat in a creaky chair, waiting for my chief resident's arrival to my first night shift of my intern year. I contemplated possible medical crises that the night might bring as I tried to fight the fear engulfing me like a fog over a city. My intern year had been rough. I'm not sure I've ever experienced true depression, but that year I had my toe in the water. I sighed as the metal latch of the heavy wooden door released its grip allowing Dr Wayne Bryant Jr and the sound of patients in the hallway to enter the room. "Big night tonight," he said, setting down his belongings with a clang. The juxtaposition of his positivity with my gloominess was not lost on me.

The road had never been easy. Before Dr Bryant arrived, I had relived every detail of the ups and downs of my 20s. Traditionally, students go to medical school, apply to one specialty, and match. My experience was far from that. Poor test-taking skills and mediocre grades have plagued me as long as I can remember. My story includes 5 years of college, 2 years of graduate school, 4 years of rejections from medical schools, and finally completing 4 years of medical school. I took an extended path from start to finish, but graduated nonetheless. Quitting is something I do not do.

As I waited for my shift to begin, I remembered the anxious days of applying to residency programs. Failures on COMLEX-USA made it seem unlikely that I would match into my first choice of emergency medicine. After numerous applications I found myself looking at a nearly empty email inbox. After weighing my options, I decided family medicine would be my second possibility.

Match week finally arrived. On that Monday at the appointed time, a message popped up on my phone. "Congratulations! You have matched!" A gentle click echoed in my room as I locked my phone and sat silently in bed wondering what specialty I had matched with.

Match Day was that Friday. Ding! I looked at my computer as a new email chimed in my inbox.

My heart sank when I saw that my match was in family medicine. My parents were smiling, and big hugs and congratulations were offered all around. At the time, regret and self-pity were all I could think about.

My mentality began a downward trajectory. I chose a bad attitude to deal with my disappointment. I spent hours contemplating if I should have gone into medicine at all, and wondering why I wasn't "good enough" to match into my chosen specialty. I thought of quitting, which we've established I don't do. During the weekdays, my highlight was going to bed. In the mornings, the weight of having to do it all over again was daunting. I didn't talk much about how I was feeling. Medicine is fickle, and although my residency program was a safe place to talk, there is always that underlying concern that you'll be perceived as weak or incompetent.

My mind jolted back to the present as Dr Bryant settled in. "What are your goals for tonight?" he inquired, logging into the computer. The voice in my head answered "Survive" and "Don't kill anyone." My outer voice responded, "Learn as much as possible." He leaned back in his chair, pivoting to face me, and asked, "How're things going?" He was unaware of the metaphors running through my head. "Not well," I admitted. I divulged the fear that overshadowed my life. He didn't know that I often cried on the way home from work and that my solitary day off per week was the highlight of my existence. In that moment Dr Bryant showed me that we were in this together and he would do whatever he could to push me forward in my education and well-being. We spoke for a couple of hours, delving into the realms of resiliency, his own struggles, and the power of attitude. He taught me that a negative mindset steals life's joys. We marveled at how incredible it was that 2 Black men were running an inpatient team, recognizing the rarity and significance. Dr Bryant, that night and many more to come, exemplified excellence for both of us, even when I perceived my contribution as meager. He instilled within me the courage to believe in myself.

Suddenly a piercing call to action rang out as the pager vibrated across the table. I knew this was my time for growth and courage. "This is Dr U, with

family medicine. We're on the way," I said, feeling the fog trying to consume me. Dr Bryant picked up his stethoscope, and I followed him toward the unknown. As we exited the stairwell breathing loudly through our masks, I saw a crowd of nurses spilling into the hallway from one room. Undoubtedly this was our destination. Dr Bryant nodded, allowing me to take the lead. I thought to myself: I've got this.

The next morning as our shift was ending, Dr Bryant congratulated me. "You did a great job. I don't think you even needed me here for help." I drove home without a tear.

Over the next 2 years, Dr Bryant continued to guide me. He was always my boss but also would become my friend. When he transitioned from resident to faculty member, I helped him move out of his apartment and into his new home. Throughout it all, his unwavering attitude and dedication to teaching and mentorship remained a constant source of inspiration. My self-pity turned to strength, and I started each day with a positive attitude.

Almost 3 years later I had my final night call in the familiar off-white room awaiting the buzz of the pager that Dr Bryant had taught me how to use. On this occasion, however, I was alone with the program director. He commended me on my achievements and asked, "What changed over the

last 2 years? Your attitude has undergone a remarkable transformation. It's as if you flipped a switch." "Dr Bryant," I said. "His mentorship has paved the way for my growth and success. The influence he instills will leave an indelible mark on my professional and personal journey."

During the last year of residency, my interest in emergency medicine still spoke to me. I made the unusual decision to apply to residency for the second time. Fortunately, a fantastic program was willing to give me a chance. As I sit here, an intern again, but this time in emergency medicine, I think how improbable my journey has been. My mentality almost stopped me from succeeding because I focused only on the negatives. My mentor saved me from myself. I think of Dr Bryant when nervous medical students join me in the emergency department. My chair creaks as I turn to face them. "Big night tonight."



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