

The Medical Commencement Archive

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Commencement Address

A Good Job

Dr. Dreesen grew up in a Navy family. Before earning her MD at Harvard Medical School, she completed a BA in History and African Studies from Boston University after spending a year at the University of Nairobi. After a year as an Obstetrics and Gynecology intern, she elected to train in General Surgery and graduated from the New England Deaconess residency in 1994. She pursued further training in Surgical Critical Care at the University of Maryland Shock Trauma Center. After training, Dr. Dreesen and her husband started a rural General Surgery practice in western North Carolina. Dr. Dreesen has been at the University of North Carolina since 2006 and currently serves as the Chief of the Division of General and Acute Care Surgery there. She is known for her many years as a column writer for the Raleigh News and Observer, exploring experiences and issues from the world of medicine.

*W*elcome new doctors, old doctors, families, proud, loving, glowing families.

Thirty years ago, I was you - walking across the stage with my friends, getting my diploma from the Dean. My parents were in the audience sitting with the parents of my friends, and they could not have been happier. They'd been pretty pumped up when I got into medical school. But they were over the top that I actually finished. Graduation day was a good day for us Dreesens, and I can't tell you how honored I am to share this good day with all of you.

When I walked off the stage 30 years ago, I really thought I had it made. I had matched into a good residency. I already knew some of the interns that I'd be working with. They seemed like nice people. I would be earning a paycheck for goodness sake, which was certainly a step forward. So, I was excited as I walked off the stage, because I had landed myself a good job.

And, I will say, that I'd had some crummy jobs before medical school, so I knew the difference between a good job and a bad one. And I'm going to say a little bit about that today: about why your new job isn't just a good job, it's a great job. It's a complicated, bloody, hilari-

ous, exhausting, inspiring job that will challenge you every day for the rest of your life. And jobs don't get any better than that!

So, here's what happened. My mom made me take typing in 8th grade. "Liz," she said, "you need a skill. And you don't have any." So, being a dutiful daughter, I took typing. All my pre-doctor jobs were typing jobs, and all my ideas about good jobs came from the world of clerical work. But we do a lot of clerical work here in the world of medicine, and a lot of the principles of good jobs hold true for virtually all jobs. So here are my pre-doctoring ideas of what constituted a good job:

In good jobs, you don't have to dress up too much for work. You get to wear comfortable clothes. The work is interesting in good jobs and there is some variety to it. Good jobs come with friendly coworkers. (My first medical job was typing in the morgue at Boston City Hospital. The pathologists let me come to watch autopsies on my lunch hour, which was pretty friendly and welcoming.) If a job was super good, it came with an office. And, obviously, a good job meant I wasn't doing something I didn't think was right, things that would hurt people. I wasn't selling people things they didn't need, or figuring out ways to dump coal ash in the nearest river.

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So, now, let's look at the job that you are graduating into. How does it stack up against my strict secretarial good job criteria? Will you dress comfortably? Of course. Because honestly, at any given moment in medicine, somebody could throw up on you. So, as a group we dress respectably, but nothing too fancy.

Good coworkers? Check. In fact, some of our coworkers are so great that we have to marry them, which is what I did. And even many of ones you don't marry will inspire you. You've been hooded by my partner, Dr. Anthony Charles, who works both here and in Malawi where he has built a surgery residency from scratch. You'll have coworkers like him who will amaze you.

Variety? OMG. Every day is different in medicine, because every day you will meet a patient who surprises you. You thought he was just a guy with hypertension, but actually the person in front of you won the silver star as a combat medic in Germany in World War II. You have a woman struggling with obesity now, but as a teenager, she was the Roller Skating Champion of Ohio. And your hyperthyroid patient makes peach moonshine and he brings it to you! The breadth and variety of human experience will enrich you every day.

And yes, you'll have an office which is not just a place to do paperwork. It's also a place where you can sit down and look things up. Because even thirty years into it, you will, like me, see things you haven't seen before. And that is just fantastic.

But there's more to a good job than my secretarial checklist, and I've learned a couple more things about jobs as I've worked in surgery.

The first thing is this: A good job changes your life. Now, of course, there are many things that change our lives. LOVE, perhaps, above all is what changes our lives. Children. Illness changes our lives too and the lives of our patients. But a good job changes your life too. And every one who graduates today will find something new in yourselves as you work in the trenches of medicine.

In my own case, medicine made me a pillar of the community, a leader in my town. I'd been kind of an outsider through college and medical school – the protestor demographic. I was picketing the Dean's office over my school's labor policies, arguing with the administration about curriculum. But when I moved to a poor mill town of 10,000, my patients and my town let me know they needed me to lead. They invited me to talk about breast cancer at the county libraries. They put me on the Board of our county mental health service, because they needed the expertise of a doctor, even if that doctor was just a surgeon. I sat on the steering committee that built the first YMCA in our community, with a sliding scale membership fee, so that everyone in our county could actually exercise.

As some here know, I never gave up protesting, but I became a town leader – something I never thought that I would be -- because of my education and my job. And that's what good jobs do. They don't just change what you do, they change who you are, how you see yourself, and how others see you.

In your case, even the shyest among you, have already been forced to discover that you are public speakers because frankly, medical education forces us to speak publicly – from small group, to rounds to conferences. Becoming a public speaker is an unappreciated fringe benefit of a medical education. But its transformative and empowering. Not everyone in this world knows how to get up in front a bunch of people and say what they think. But you all do. You've been changed. And because you have this skill, you are a force for change, which is a powerful thing to be.

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The other thing that medicine has taught me about good jobs is this. It's not enough to have a job in which you don't do wrong. That's a low bar to set when looking at jobs. In fact, a good job, a really good job, your new good job is one in which you have the opportunity to do moral good. And that is not an opportunity that every job affords.

Every working day, for example, you will have an opportunity to take care of people who cannot pay you. Every day you will find yourself educating people who have way less education than you do, so they can try to understand an illness that is changing their lives. You will advocate for prisoners shackled to their beds, for developmentally disabled children who need more home services. But you will do even more, I know, than simply care for individual patients, because you are graduates of the University of North Carolina.

This hospital, North Carolina Memorial Hospital, and this four-year medical school, opened in 1952. Though the hospital was named in memory of North Carolina's World War II dead, it was built because of the men and women who couldn't serve in World War II. In this poor rural state, 50% of white North Carolinians and 70% of black North Carolinians were rejected by the World War II draft because of poor health. Your hospital and your school were built to serve these people.

“...you will do even more, I know, than simply care for individual patients...”

Since day one of its founding, this school has been dedicated to the health of this state. And you all, from day one of medical school have learned not just about the health of individuals, but how their health is related to the health of their communities, their state, and their nation. By teaching you epidemiology, health policy, metrics with which to measure community health and the effectiveness of care, this school has equipped you to advocate not just for individuals, but for a healthy healthcare system that does good for everyone. You graduates are armed to fight for a system of mental health that keeps mentally ill people at home and out of emergency rooms. You are prepared to advocate for LGBTQ youth and the laws that protect them and keep them healthy. You are healers in the broadest sense of the word.

You are about to start a job that lets you do good every single day, that challenges you to do good every single day. And because you are graduating from the University of North Carolina, you are prepared to do good in every venue – from the exam room to the legislature. Hallelujah.

I am proud of you. Congratulations!