



KERN NATIONAL NETWORK FOR CARING & CHARACTER IN MEDICINE

Cultivating Character and Crafting Your Story

by Hannah Sherfinski, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (UWSMPH)

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—Dell Medical School at the University of Texas at Austin, the Medical College of Wisconsin, 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.

Hannah Sherfinski is UWSMPH's contest winner. Below is her essay:

I'm a firm believer in the power of a good story. Recently, I started reading "Tattoos on the Heart" by Fr. Gregory Boyle. In this book, Fr. Greg shares stories about what it's like to live in a community with gang members, affectionately called his homies. These stories are filled with sorrow and grief, as communities continue to be ripped apart by gun violence and animosity, but there's also an overarching theme of hope. One night in bed, I read a line that gave me goosebumps: "Sooner or later, we all discover that kindness is the only strength there is." That's the power of stories—they give words to ideas we don't know how to express; they describe diverse characters who we can relate to or who challenge us; and they make us pause to reflect on our own lives and the stories that we want to tell.



Character, to me, is the accumulation of one's thoughts, words and behaviors that demonstrate how an individual aims to live her life—a mission statement, in action. When reflecting on a health professional who emulates authentic character, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria immediately comes to mind. Around UW Health, Dr. Navsaria (MPH, MSLIS, MD), is the bow tie-wearing, enthusiastic physician committed to promoting the well-being of children by integrating his passions for medicine, public health and literature. As the founding medical director of Reach Out and Read Wisconsin, Dr. Navsaria conveys the message that "books build better brains." Through the power of reading, early childhood relationships are strengthened between children and their caregivers, thereby promoting resilience and decreasing their risk for experiencing toxic stress.

As a student pursuing an MD-MPH degree, I often find it difficult to imagine what a career in medicine and public health could look like. However, Dr. Navsaria beautifully merges his concern for his pediatric patient population with his desire to make society a place where families can thrive. Whether it's advocating for legislation that promotes safe, secure early childhood relationships or teaching public health and medical students about early brain development, Dr. Navsaria's words and actions convey his mission to promote the well-being of children. There is no doubt that Dr. Navsaria has a strong work ethic and determination, but more than anything, I'm impressed by the ways in which he utilizes compassion and creativity to amplify public health messages, such as

through his monthly pieces in The Cap Times or his "Reach Out and Read" podcast. We need innovative strategies like these in order to overcome the health crises of our era—including COVID-19, racial injustice and climate change.

Dr. Navsaria has truly become my mentor. Like him, I am interested in how early-life trauma affects the developing brain. Specifically, I am passionate about working with foster youth, especially teens who are about to age out of the system. In the moments where I become anxious about finding my niche in medicine, Dr. Navsaria reminds me that instead of fixating on the future, I should focus on pursuing experiences that help me become a more authentic version of myself—such as committing to Big Brothers, Big Sisters, writing letters to the editors about social causes that keep me up at night, or leading a student organization centered around environmental sustainability in the health care field.

Living with character requires introspection to know the values that are important to me and audacity to embrace a life of authenticity. I'm inspired by the way Dr. Navsaria lives his life, but he never expects me to mimic his actions. After all, there is no "right way" to pursue a career in medicine. Instead, he encourages me to reflect on how my unique character can shape the way I strive to live. As my mentor and a fellow lover of literature, Dr. Navsaria gives me the support I need to find my voice, pick up a pen and write my own story. ■