

SEEING THE BEAUTY OF PEOPLE THROUGH ADVERSITY

I am generally a fairly easygoing person, as my hair, wardrobe, and casual attitude likely imply. The one area in which I am not laid-back is my teaching. People who know me are often surprised to see how demanding I am of my trainees.

I feel a profound sense of responsibility to help my trainees become the best clinicians, surgeons, and patient advocates they can be. I find that traditional medical training encourages linear thinking, promotes robotic memorization, and limits innovation. I try to break this down and rebuild the curiosity of learning, critical thinking, and pushing the limit. I push my trainees as hard as I push myself, and I expect them to rise to the challenge. Such pressure can be uncomfortable, but it is often necessary to progress beyond one's self-imposed limits. After spending a year with me, my trainees often tell me that they have changed as people, having gained new perspectives, new ways of thinking, and confidence in navigating our world of challenges. But, little did I expect, this year I would also change.

This Glaucoma and Advanced Anterior Segment Surgery (GAASS) fellowship year started like any other, with a diverse wide-eyed group of three—the #GAASSgirls and Alaa, as they called themselves. I pushed them hard to go beyond their perceived limits, and I expected a lot of them, often leaving them to find their way independently. Managing some of the world's most complex eye conditions is hard enough; demanding perfection in that pursuit makes it even more challenging. These fellows progressed, but I wanted more. Sometimes it was frustrating when my expectations weren't met, and it showed. Then COVID-19 hit.

The pandemic has been a brutal, surreal, and trying experience for all of us. For me, one of the strangest outcomes was that it was my fellows—the very people I was so focused on helping—who ended up reminding me of what is truly important. To be honest, this realization has changed my perspective as a fellowship preceptor now and in the future.



The term *band of brothers* originated in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Before the Battle of Agincourt, King Henry V uses the phrase when speaking to his troops about going into battle together, spilling blood, and sharing in a struggle that will form a familial bond as close as any blood tie. Through COVID-19, my fellows have been my band of sisters and brothers. When you are scared and feel the weight of the world on your shoulders, there is nothing quite like having the people who rely on you step up so that you can rely on them. When the pandemic hit, my fellows were suddenly confident and sure of their actions. They took initiative and made smart decisions. They rose to a challenge I would have never wished on them, and they made me so very proud.

As much as my fellows stepped up in the face of adversity, their evolution was also likely influenced by my experience and response. The pandemic put a pause on the usual craziness of my professional and personal life. I was grounded, and I couldn't help but stop, listen, and spend more time with my team (albeit virtually). And, boy, did I learn a lot about the people I work with; in fact, I wish I had gotten to know them better sooner. As we continued to interact with and support one another, I started to greatly look forward to our regular #GAASSchats and to seeing my fellows' smiling faces to give me hope. Perhaps showing my vulnerabilities allowed them to feel more comfortable

sharing their own. Our conversations became less focused on my expectations and demands and more centered on support and nurturing. During that time, I realized something big. I have always made a point to put pressure on my fellows so that they are prepared for the pressures of the real world. (Tough love, as they say.) But, based on what I have seen this year, this may not be the best way.

COVID-19 has had some silver linings. This crisis has changed me in a way I can't imagine happening otherwise. I am rethinking how I train my fellows. I am sure I will not wholly change, as it is my nature to push people, strive for excellence, and challenge the norm. Although challenges are acceptable, human beings also need confidence and security. Seeing the best in people is beautiful, and love can go a long way in learning. In this, I remind myself of the main reasons I became a teacher: to pass on my knowledge for others to build on and to learn from my students in the process. The real privilege is meeting the amazing people who dedicate a year of their lives to learning. It's a reminder not of what I give them, but of the honor they give me in being a part of their journey. ■

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