

As the twig is bent

By Dieu Thi T. Nguyen

Graduating from Dartmouth College this past June was a memorable event for me for many reasons—perhaps most of all because I was able to share it with a special group of people who had helped make my dream of graduating from college a reality. At the Commencement ceremony were not only my parents and sister, but also my high school advanced-math teacher, Swati Sharma.

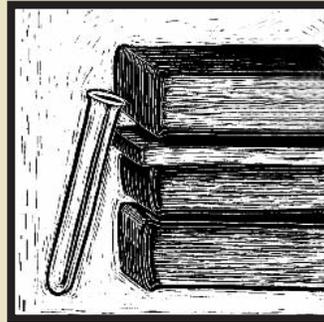
Mrs. Sharma was present thanks to a new program launched by Dartmouth College. She was one of four inaugural recipients of the Dartmouth Prize for Exceptional Teaching: A Celebration of Outstanding Elementary and Secondary Education. When I first learned of the unique opportunity to nominate a teacher who had made a tremendous impact on my life, I immediately thought of Mrs. Sharma. My nomination of Mrs. Sharma was a small gesture of my appreciation for her genuine love of teaching, unyielding support, and 34 years of devotion and service to Memorial High School in Manchester, N.H.

Dynamic: As one of thousands of students whose lives she touched, I saw how Mrs. Sharma took the rigid structure of the classroom and transformed it into a lively and dynamic community with respect as its guiding tenet. In this positive environment, my classmates and I felt comfortable challenging ourselves and each other to think critically, testing our intellectual curiosity by asking questions, and sharing our different approaches to solving problems.

What stands out about Mrs. Sharma, beyond her enthusiasm and love for teaching, is her natural ability to engender trust from her students and to express concern for their overall well-being. As a first-generation Vietnamese-American, I found the college application and financial aid processes complex and daunting. Yet Mrs. Sharma encouraged me and instilled in me the confidence to aim high and apply to academically challenging schools such as Dartmouth.

Throughout my time as an undergraduate at Dartmouth, Mrs. Sharma continued to serve as a mentor. Her support was especially motivating during the process of applying to medical schools. Mrs. Sharma regularly reminded me to reflect on my ideals, especially my passion for service, which had inspired me to choose a career in medicine, and to let those ideals guide me to become an empathetic, competent, and humble physician.

Respect: I had cherished the emphasis Mrs. Sharma had put on making her classroom a place where there was a sense of community and of respect, on making it a safe environment for intellectual and personal growth. So those were the qualities I was looking for in my ideal medical school, and they were what ultimately drew me to Dart-



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mouth Medical School. A sense of community was apparent from the activities during orientation week, when Dr. Joseph O'Donnell played the song "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" and stressed the importance of collaboration and of caring for one another as members of the DMS community.

That message of support and cooperation was reinforced by a faculty member who later remarked to me that he considered even the first-year students to be simply colleagues who are at a different stage of their training. From the first few weeks of my arrival at DMS, I have been struck by the openness and enthusiasm of administrators, faculty, and staff members alike.

And within the brief time that I have been in medical school, I have observed that the teaching and learning at DMS have a presence well beyond the framework of the classroom. From my preceptor, Dr. Adam Schwarz, a family physician at the Hanover Continuity Clinic, I have learned valuable lessons about how to build rapport, trust, and respect with patients. And while accompanying him on house calls, I have seen how engaged he is with patients and how much he values their input.

In the Nursing Collaborative elective, I observed exceptional care being provided to DHMC patients as I shadowed Kathy Davis, a nurse in the hematology-oncology unit, and Alicia Patten, a nurse on the inpatient surgery unit. I gained a deeper appreciation for nurses' breadth of knowledge and expertise, as well as the multifaceted care they provide to their patients.

Reflect: The clinical experiences I have had thus far at DMS have stimulated me to reflect on the type of physician that I would like to become. One of the factors that drew me into medicine is the fact that lifelong teaching and learning are integral to the field. As a physician, I hope to teach my patients about their illnesses and to empower them to make informed and important decisions regarding their health. I hope to carry the lessons I have learned from inspiring teachers such as Mrs. Sharma and the members of the DMS-DHMC community to constantly strive to improve not only as a learner, but also as a teacher.

It was an honor for me to participate in the Prize for Exceptional Teaching—a program that recognizes elementary and secondary teachers, whose selflessness and tireless dedication often go unnoticed in our society. I am very grateful to Dartmouth College President James Wright and his office for funding such a noble program and to the students, faculty, and administrators who served on the committee that reviewed the name-blind nominations and selected the four honorees. I found it very rewarding to reflect on the important roles that teachers have played in my life, and to have Mrs. Sharma share such a significant moment as my college graduation with me. ■

The Student Notebook essay offers insight into the activities or opinions of students and trainees. Nguyen graduated from Dartmouth College in 2007, with a major in neuroscience, and is now a first-year M.D. student at Dartmouth Medical School.