



Icahn
School of
Medicine at
Mount
Sinai

COMMENCEMENT 2021 DENNIS S. CHARNEY, MD

ADVERSITY REVEALS THE CHARACTER AND RESILIENCE OF MOUNT SINAI

Members of the Board of Trustees, Family, Friends, Faculty and Class of 2021, welcome to the Commencement ceremony for graduating MD, PhD and MD/PhD students of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. It is my honor to preside over this joyous celebration of the journey that our students have taken. For four or more years, they have acquired knowledge, built skills and matured in preparation for the next stage of their careers in biomedicine. The term Commencement reminds us that today is truly the beginning of what is certain to be a rewarding, stimulating and successful future for the Class of 2021.

As a Dean of this wonderful School since 2004, I have seen many outstanding students learn and grow at Mount Sinai. I can say without hesitation that this year's graduates are among the most remarkable students and people that I have ever had the pleasure of knowing.

Class of 2021, you are uniformly intelligent, talented, passionate and curious, committed to becoming leaders in your chosen field and strong voices for social justice. During the past year, you have unexpectedly been tested by the unique, almost unimaginable challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We always face challenges in our lives. We don't always know when challenges will arise, what they will entail, or how difficult they will be. Nor can we predict whether and how we will react to meet them. Will we be resilient and even grow from the experience?

2020 and now 2021 have forced all of you, and all of us, to grapple with unprecedented stress created by the pandemic – isolation, illness, fear, even loss of loved ones. Our personal and professional identities, our strength and commitment, have been tested. We did not know how we would respond, and whether we could rise to the occasion. But looking back over the past 16 months, we now know the answer, clearly and resoundingly.

In February of 2020, you graduates were just students looking forward to completing your theses or clerkships, enjoying family and friends, and vaguely beginning to think about life after graduation. Literally overnight, your world changed, as it did for all of us.

New York was at the epicenter of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, like a tsunami, arrived with little warning or time for preparation. Although initially the medical community knew little about this mysterious virus, or how to tame it, all eyes were on us to understand, fight and conquer. The world watched. Waited. Hoped and prayed. And we did not disappoint.

Mount Sinai clinicians have been on the front lines throughout the pandemic, providing care to a seemingly unstoppable flood of extremely sick patients. They have put aside their personal safety, their fear and fatigue, to be there for our patients each and every day. And when a patient doesn't survive, as still happens all too often, these same caregivers mourn the loss right alongside grieving loved ones.

At the same time, Mount Sinai research faculty have studied the COVID-19 virus from every possible angle. Our microbiologists, immunologists, and pathologists invented one of the world's most accurate tests for detecting COVID-19 infections, developed a blood test to measure immunity in recovered patients, and created yet another test to determine when patients require even more aggressive treatment. Working side-by-side, Mount Sinai researchers and clinicians have successfully translated groundbreaking discoveries into effective strategies for disarming the virus and restoring health. Survival rates have improved, and many more patients are going home.

And who has been right there supporting our clinical and research faculty? You graduates. At the height of the pandemic, hundreds of student volunteers in both the MD program and

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hundreds of student volunteers in both the MD program and the Graduate School were deployed in areas as diverse as telehealth, pharmacy, protective personal equipment, lab support, data generation and analysis. You built tents to house overflow patients, served as scribes for attending physicians, uncrated and assembled donated ventilators. You were tireless in your commitment, your courage and your selflessness. You, like our faculty, deserve to be called heroes.

As if the stress and uncertainties of the pandemic weren't enough, you students rose to the additional challenge of becoming champions in the Black Lives Matter movement, and in broader anti-racism initiatives. After observing and absorbing the injustice of recent tragic police actions, and putting those events into the context of an indefensible history of racism in America, you didn't hesitate for a moment to take a stand against racism. Medical and graduate students sat on the anti-racism Task Force, true partners in creating a strategic plan for the entire Health System. Students participated in anti-racism town halls, and also raised our awareness around racism and bias experienced by people who are Native American, latinx, immigrants, and of Asian and Pacific Island descent. Your actions will help to keep Mount Sinai at the forefront of anti-racism work. Again, you are heroes in every sense of the term.

On St. Crispin's Day In 1450, King Henry V of England led a decisive battle in the Hundred Year's War, victorious despite the vast superiority of the opposing French forces. Shakespeare

famously memorialized the event in his Battle of Agincourt speech, writing "And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by, From this day to the ending of the world, But we in it shall be remember'd." Class of 2021, your noble deeds and bravery in the battle against COVID-19 will long be remembered. Mount Sinai is compiling a history of the pandemic that will include the contributions that you, our students, made against what at times seemed an unstoppable foe. You will tell your partners, your children, your grandchildren what you did. Your efforts will not be forgotten.

Looking ahead, I know that you graduates will do great things. Many of you will remain at Mount Sinai for additional clinical and research training, some will move to other elite schools and hospitals to continue honing your skills. No matter where you are, one thing is certain. You will continue to devote impressive energy to your careers, distinguishing yourselves as pathfinders and leaders in your chosen fields, and as advocates for social justice. You will channel your passion to improving the health of the population, whether in patient exam rooms, at laboratory benches or at computer terminals.

I have found that adversity reveals the content of one's Character and Resilience. It is in this context, that I am sure that whatever the challenge and whatever your endeavors, you will change our world for the Better.

CONGRATULATIONS!