



# COMMENCEMENT 2017 DENNIS S. CHARNEY, MD

## GREAT LEADERS ARE RESILIENT AND COURAGEOUS

Welcome to the 48th Commencement of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

Family members, Trustees, Faculty, Alumni and Honored Guests, sitting before you are the Class of 2017 graduates of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, who are among the most distinguished graduates of any medical and graduate school in the world.

And, as we all know, our graduates did not get to this moment of high achievement by themselves.

Let us have a moment of silence to think about the loved ones who supported them during the long journey to this day, and who could not be with us today.

Class of 2017 – Please stand and show your appreciation, with thunderous applause, to thank those friends and family who are here with you today.

The Class of 2017 is characterized by remarkable achievements in scholarship, scientific discovery, and service to our local community and the nation!

### **The Community Service of the Class of 2017 is legendary.**

What have they done?

- Organized the New York City Coalition to Dismantle Racism in Health Systems
- Co-founded the Nexus Course: “Deconstructing Race in Medicine and Health: Our Patients Our Selves,” which explores the role of racism in health disparities among patients, as well as the implications of race and racial bias on medical training and practice of physicians
- Expanded the curriculum and enrollment for Sinai’s Youth Education program
- Established fully-funded eight-week research internships for women in African universities
- Led a group to join the #ProtectOurPatients movement in Washington, DC, and petitioned and met with senators such as Bernie Sanders, Cory Booker, Kamala Harris, Tim Kaine, and Elizabeth Warren to lobby against the repeal of the Affordable Care Act.
- Created Nutrition Corps – a training and service venue for students to coach patients suffering from obesity, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes.
- Launched EHHOP Consulting – a student group charged with supporting the expansion and development of student-run free clinics across the country.
- They have received multiple research awards from the National Institutes of Health, New York Academy of Medicine, Doris Duke Foundation, American Association for Cancer Research, Digestive Disease Research Foundation, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, American Society of Nephrology, Society for Vascular Medicine, and American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, to name a few!

### **The Class of 2017 has conducted outstanding research which has the potential. . .**

- To discover a new generation of broadly protective universal flu vaccines and novel antiviral therapies
- To discover drugs to stop the progression of melanoma and other cancers
- To develop human engineered cardiac tissues to cure lethal heart disease
- To identify the genetic basis of multiple diseases ranging from cancer and heart disease to neurological and psychiatric disorders
- To determine how the microbiome and immune status can promote health and prevent disease
- And some in the audience may be interested in this! To utilize Chemokines and growth factor signaling to promote hair growth

Class of 2017, the road to this moment was not on the map. When you leave this room, your pursuit of personal dreams born long before you came to Mount Sinai will continue. Before that happens, though, for a few minutes, let me share my dream for you and, as I do so, feel free to dream along with me. Let us dream big, together.

In my dream, Mount Sinai graduates change the world.

In every generation, a group of individuals must rise to lead the charge against the great challenges of the time, must, in the words of Robert F. Kennedy, “*see things as they are and say why... dream things that never were and say why not.*”

Graduates, these, our times, are no exception.

In my dream... for our times... you are that special group of individuals. Scientists, physicians, scholars, adventurers, educators, activists, advocates – who will rise to set the course through the storm.

Now, I should warn you: not only was the road to this moment not on the map, but neither is the road moving forward.

Indeed, this dream is born of the hope that the Class of 2017 will find solutions where my generation could not. However, while I can’t point you towards the road, I can tell you what you will need as you seek it out.

### **A Prescription for Leadership**

Here is mine. . .

- Get the best out of people by earning their respect and affection, and by being authentic
- Recognize and unleash creativity in those around you
- Work to improve every single day

- When times get tough, get tougher
- Make entrepreneurship a way of life
- Dig deep to find hidden gifts in people. Every human being is a creative, incredible talent.
- Learn from failure and criticism. Yet, always be bold and never stop believing you can achieve what others deem impossible. Those who do, achieve the Most.
- Dig deepest on your darkest days
- And remember, disease is a tough enemy who will never give up. Will you?
- Know who to follow. Medicine and science are team sports. Make no mistake, the names remembered by history are just symbols, for a team is behind every great feat.

**In this prescription, you may note a common theme. To be a great leader you are going to need to be Resilient and have Courage.**

President John F. Kennedy in his book, *Profiles in Courage*, wrote “In whatever area in life one may meet the challenges of courage, whatever may be the sacrifices faced, each must decide the course to be followed. The stories of courage can teach, they can offer hope, they can provide inspiration.”

#### Let me share three Profiles in Courage

The first profile of courage is of a young woman who successfully fought off B-Cell Lymphoma after six months of debilitating chemotherapy followed by radiation treatment. How did she do it... unbelievable personal courage... unshakable mental optimism... Support from her friends and family – her parents dropped everything and came to America to care for her – and her fiancé supported her throughout and even gave her a foot massage every night. What is her professional goal? To get back to the lab and use the power of science to better understand and cure diseases.

The second profile in courage is of a young man born in Zimbabwe, he decided to get educated abroad – he gets a full scholarship to Princeton – his first day at Princeton was his first day in America. He wins a Rhodes scholarship, decides he wants to be a doctor. But his father dies of cardiomyopathy. His mother, his role model, spends her savings to afford the first year of medical school, before he was awarded a full scholarship. In his first year of medical training he finds out he too has a potentially fatal cardiomyopathy. Does he give up? No, he gets the treatment he needs... And his goals are to help those who need it most. He co-founds a non-profit called Kushinga (which appropriately means to persevere through difficult times) to enhance the mental health system in Zimbabwe, which is virtually non-existent.

The third Profile in Courage is of a young woman born in Queens, lived in a basement in Brooklyn, lost her first serious boyfriend in a car accident, was severely injured herself in a subsequent car accident, being hit by an intoxicated driver, was left with residual medical problems. What is her response? She becomes the lead organizer for the New York City Coalition to Dismantle Racism, becomes cofounder of the local chapter of Doctors for America. Establishes a partnership with the East Harlem Community Health Committee to improve access to care. She does all this and much more...

Do not underestimate how hard it is to be resilient. It requires courage to confront painful realities, the faith there will be a solution when one is not immediately evident, and the tenacity to carry on when the situation appears to be hopeless. In my dream where Mount Sinai graduates change the world, they do so by shining through on their darkest days. How do I know this is possible? Each of the three heroes I just described are not only in this room right now, but are graduates of the Class of 2017.

Scientists, I guarantee you will experience failure more often than success. I did. It was not until I was 50 years old that my team discovered a treatment, Ketamine, that may help millions of patients with treatment resistant depression. Never ever give up.

Physicians, you will lose patients that will make you weep and experience intense anguish. You will need to find the strength to carry on. To continue to provide HOPE. Remember you are a Healer, which involves not only Skill, but also Mind and Spirit.

As many of you know, on August 29, 2016 I was the victim of a crime. I was hit by a shotgun blast in my right shoulder. Luckily it missed major arteries and nerves. But I did lose half of my blood and spent five days in the ICU at Mount Sinai Hospital.

What helped me recover? First, my family, friends, and colleagues gave me enormous support and taught me that “love is a power stronger than death.”<sup>1</sup> Second, during my moments of doubt, my Mount Sinai doctors gave me hope and more HOPE. Third, I needed the motivation from the students here today. I am proud to be your Dean. Who would not be, given your character and accomplishments?

You motivated me to not only recover, but to be a better leader, to challenge you to your limits, inspire you intellectually, and, as you all know, defeat you athletically (or at least try). Class of 2017, I sincerely thank you and hope, in some small way, I can serve as a role model as you begin your journey.

And, remember One Dream, One Person, can benefit generations! When we dream together? We can change the world!

Class of 2017

What starts RIGHT HERE, what starts RIGHT NOW, is a quest

*“To dream the impossible dream  
To fight the unbeatable foe  
To bear with unbearable sorrow  
And to run where the brave dare not go”<sup>2</sup>*

Thank you!

1. \***Terry’s Song** is a song written by Bruce Springsteen and released on his 2007 album Magic.

2. \*\***The Impossible Dream (The Quest)** is song composed by Mitch Leigh, with lyrics written by Joe Darion. The song is from the 1965 Broadway musical *Man of La Mancha* and is also featured in the 1972 film of the same name starring Peter O’Toole.