

Oh, Genevieve

Michael Sierra

made a patient cry today. She wept and sniveled and wiped the tears that coursed down her soft, fat, wrinkled cheeks. I couldn't believe it. It wasn't because I had disclosed a dire diagnosis or an ominous result of a test or lab. She wasn't depressed. It wasn't because I had brought up a sensitive topic, or poked her in the eye, or anything. I told her that this was the last time I would be rounding at the nursing home in which she resided. After 11 months of rounding every Wednesday at one of the nursing homes scattered throughout the Treasure Coast of Florida, my Chronic Care Clerkship had come to an end. It was time for me to move on to my fourth and final year of medical school. I never imagined that I would have created this strong of a relationship with a patient this early in my medical career. It was an amazing and humbling experience I will never forget. What follows is a biographical homage to Genevieve, the first non-pediatric and non-psychiatric patient I brought to tears, and the first patient that ever told me, "I'm going to miss you."

When I first walked into Gen's room, I saw a gray haired, fair-skinned woman trapped in adipose. She lay sound asleep, her head tucked away in superfluous amounts of chin and neck. Her sheets created the silhouette of what resembled the shell of a full-grown Galapagos tortoise. I felt bad for her. I didn't even know her, but I felt bad for her. There was no way



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she could get out of bed, even with assistance. And compared to the other patients in the nursing home, she looked relatively young, maybe early 70s. My eyes scanned the room, noticing the bathroom was about 10 feet from her bed. There was no bedside commode. I wondered how she urinated or defecated. I probably would have known this answer had I read her chart before entering her room. She began to stir and awaken. I thought I better introduce myself before she wakes to find some creepy guy in a white coat watching her sleep. "Hi, Genevieve. My name is Mike Sierra. I'm a third year medical student working with Dr. Brenner. He's asked me to introduce myself to you. I will be working with him for the next year and, with his assistance, will help take care of you and the other patients in the nursing home." Her powder blue eyes flashed behind her slowly blinking and waking eyelids. Eventually they focused onto mine and time stood still as I waited for her response. It dawned on me that I didn't even know if she was too demented to respond. I cursed myself for not having read her chart. "Well, why don't you tell Dr. Brenner that I'm pissed off at him. He doesn't come by my room to say hello anymore. I haven't seen him in weeks!" The door behind me opened and Dr. Brenner entered the room. Before he could say anything, Genevieve snapped, "You know, Dr. Brenner, since you obviously don't care to see me anymore, I've decided to change physicians. His name is (she stared at my nametag) Dr. Michael Sierra. And he's way younger and better looking than you are, by the way." They both erupted in laughter. Dr. Brenner went over to her bed to give her a warm hug, and I thought to myself, this lady's a trip.

Black and Orange
Ana Gabriela Luján



Chasing the Sun

Ana Gabriela Luján

Gen and I got to know each other very well over the course of the year. Since she was one of the more spritely patients of the nursing home, I made an effort to round on her as often as I could. I tried to use my encounters with her to gather chief complaints, histories, physical exam findings, relevant information from her past medical history, and all the other things a medical student in training needs to compose a good oral presentation for his attending. However, Gen always found a way to derail me from my medical endeavors and sprout conversations about personal matters. She told me she was an only child who was raised in Vero by loving parents. She grew up to marry a handsome businessman and raise a wonderful son, who is currently a successful restaurant owner and philanthropist. They traveled, they lived, they laughed and they loved, catching some medical snags along the way: a tonsillectomy here, a cholecystectomy there, back surgery for a degenerated disc, a knee replacement for an arthritic knee. Her ulcerative colitis eventually resulted in a proctocolectomy and permanent ileostomy, and her hypothyroidism, diabetes, and hypertension eventually resulted in obesity and heart failure for which she was paced. Even after all of that, her spirits were high and her body was strong enough. It wasn't until her husband died suddenly of a heart attack that things began to turn south. She moved into her son's guest house and tried her best to adjust. She made less of an effort to take care of herself and got a little heavier and a little heavier. With all that weight, what once was her good knee became her bad knee and she needed her second knee replaced to complete the set. She recovered, but shortly after returning to her son's house, she

fell and broke her hip. She was admitted to the hospital, and a hip repair, a deep vein thrombosis, and a pulmonary embolism later, her son thought it best she go to a facility that could better rehabilitate, care, and supervise her. He decided to put her in a nursing home. Her son decorated her room with a nice sofa, a recliner, and the biggest TV in the entire facility. She was stabilized, but only minimally rehabilitated due to her weight and weakness. She went on to develop overflow incontinence and began to use adult diapers. Physical therapy began using a harness to stand her up but she could not walk more than a few steps. She acquired a large wheelchair that was big enough for her to sit in, just to discover she was too heavy and too weak to roll herself. And then, finally, she met me.

I followed up on her rehabilitation, treated her for recurrent UTIs, managed her diabetes, treated her for an infected decubitus ulcer, looked over her labs, and did my best to be someone she could talk to. What made the biggest impression on me besides the size of her body was the size and strength of her heart – figuratively speaking, of course. She never once felt sorry for herself, or showed any signs of depression. She never complained about wanting more mobility, or to see her son more often. She never became frustrated about her weight or medical conditions. She never even complained about the food! Everybody complains about the food. She had this sense of acceptance, resilience, and positivity. She was a personification of the old adage, “If life gives you lemons...” There were weeks where school, assignments, lack of sleep, and rotations I didn't truly enjoy would bog me down, but walking in her room would flush away my frustrations. Her laughter, conversation, and passion for life would make me realize that I didn't have much I should complain about. Many would claw at the chance to be in my position and health.

I guess what it boils down to is that she made as much of an impression on me as I did on her. I learned to be grateful and appreciative. She helped me learn medicine as well as a new perspective. I will never forget Genevieve. She helped me to realize the kind of relationships I can build going forward in my career are the kind of relationships where the learning goes both ways. She showed me how strong the human spirit can be, and the importance of reviewing a chart before entering a patient's room. She's going to miss me, and I'm going to miss her too.

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