

Dear President Volnick, Provost Ivy, Dean Whitehair, Faculty, Staff, Students, and Guests,

I am honored to be speaking with you today as this year's Distinguished Teacher of the Year. (I was happy to hear people thought I met the definition of "distinguished!".) My first order of business is to wish you all my sincerest CONGRATULATIONS! Your dedication, perseverance, and persistence have propelled you to this momentous occasion. Please give yourselves the **biggest** round of applause.

Next, I must thank the students who nominated me for this prestigious award and the selection committee for choosing me amongst an undoubtedly deserving pool of superb educators. I am truly blessed to teach at FAU College of Medicine. I'm surrounded by colleagues who collaborate with and encourage me, a Department Chair who is a mentor and friend, a Dean who sincerely understands what it means to support from the ground up, and students who inspire me. Thank you to my **MedOwl** family for giving me the opportunity to serve you! Most importantly, I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge my constant stalwart supporters—my husband Keith and my strong, sassy, independent daughters, Emily, and Dara, who are my ultimate inspiration. I love you.

When tasked with delivering an inspirational speech to this incredibly bright group, I really struggled. I thought, *what can I tell this room full of super smart people that they don't already know?* Then, during movie night with my daughters, I had an "aha moment." We were watching the *Barbie* [film] movie. I won't spoil it in case you haven't seen it, but just about every woman in the movie is named, "Barbie." There's Stereotypical Barbie, Doctor Barbie, Lawyer Barbie, Physicist Barbie, President Barbie, Supreme Court Justice Barbie, Nobel Peace Prize Barbie, Author Barbie, Diplomat Barbie—there's even a "Weird Barbie", whose "weirdness" is actually venerated! They asked me which Barbie was my favorite when I was a kid "back then." I thought about the Barbie I knew at their age—she had NO variety. She came with blonde hair, blue eyes, very pink lips, high heels, peach skin, and an impossibly perfect figure. She even had a "Dream House" that somehow just materialized for her—like it's that easy! —and it seemed as though she was solely defined by her relationship with Ken. The message was clear to little girls—if you look like this, and have a partner like this, you can have this wonderful life and this fabulous dream house! She was indeed Stereotypical Barbie. But now my children have an entirely different framework through which they view "Stereotypical" Barbie. To these girls, Barbie is every woman, and every woman is Barbie. She represents a genuine shift in the lessons we now teach our youth. As I reflected on this thought, it hit me. This is exactly what we should talk about tonight—how much the world has changed and, particularly, how much power you all have to make it an even better place than the one you inherited.

Now that you've conquered academia and are about to leave FAU's supportive Owl's Nest, I thought I'd offer some pearls for you to keep making the "real world" an even better place.

1. Continue your thirst for knowledge. Learning doesn't stop at graduation. This isn't the end, it's just the beginning! There's a reason the graduation ceremony is called "commencement!" Learning is a lifelong process; make sure to learn every day. Always stay curious, absorbing everything you can from your environment. But don't forget the most important part of learning—once you've armed yourself with knowledge, share it! Learning from each other is one of the best ways to affect change.
2. Along those lines, don't rely on someone else to educate you. Now that you've finished your classes, it's time to take the initiative and be your own professor! I typically tell our medical students and residents, "if you didn't learn at least one thing today, you didn't do your job." Go to that museum, read that book or article you've been wanting to read, look things up! It's true, there are no stupid questions, but there certainly are uninformed ones. (Be careful with your sources, though—Google, Wikipedia, ChatGPT, and others might lead you down the wrong rabbit hole. Find your **reputable**, evidence-based sources!)
3. Lean into uncertainty- Life is full of unknowns. Did you choose the right job, the right city, the right partner? Did you plan for the curve ball life threw at you? Probably not! And that's OK! You'll need to

flex your adaptability and resilience muscles. This is how we grow as humans. We remain unendingly stagnant if we don't explore beyond our comfort zones.

4. Don't fear failure- In the words of JK Rowling, "It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all, in which case you have failed by default." Each successful experience in my life has been preceded by some sort of failure. You see, it's these "falls" that provided me with a new perspective, a new avenue through which I can achieve my goal. So, I dusted myself off, adjusted my approach, and worked toward the goal. Failure is a gift, providing you with yet another opportunity to learn and grow. So, reflect upon each experience, even the ones in which you achieved your goal! We can *always* do better.
5. Be honest and humble with your shortcomings- Being transparent with your mishaps may help another person learn from your experience. It also normalizes failure! Not only is failure **normal**, it's far more commonplace than success! And equally as important as honesty is humility. I tell my girls, the smartest people in the world are the ones who know they don't know everything. You can always learn more and from someone else.
6. Invest in your community. We'll never be at a shortage of capitalism. Fortune 500 companies, the top 1%, et cetera...they're never going away. And they're extremely intangible to the vast majority of humans. A global outlook is important but look locally first. Make a difference by investing on an **individual level**. And keep in mind, "investing" doesn't always mean giving money. Spread kindness by helping a neighbor with groceries, tutoring a struggling learner, mentoring someone in whose shoes you've been, picking up litter! When I'm working in the hospital or at the medical school and I see someone has spilled water in the hallway, I just grab some paper towels and clean it up myself! Is that technically my job title? No! (Well, I'm the janitor for my kids so maybe it is.) But I like to think I prevented at least one person from slipping and fracturing their hip. While I won't get into the weeds of how much money that potentially saved our healthcare system, I do think that's the ripple effect of my otherwise insignificant action. Imagine the impact we could have if we all performed just one good deed a day.
7. Advocate for yourself and others. This is where your generation excels, you were raised to ask for the manger when something's wrong! Keep doing it (respectfully, of course)! This is how we hold each other accountable. Use those powerful voices to help our vulnerable populations, whose voices often go unheard. Your words and actions matter! (PS one of the best ways to do this is to exercise your civic duty to VOTE!)
8. And finally, never forget from whence you came- For all you hard-working, goal-oriented folks (yes, that's each of you!), it's easy to feel as though you're perpetually climbing an undefeatable mountain. You're always looking up, seeing what obstacle you must tackle before reaching the peak, where your final goal lives. And just when you think you've gotten closer, it seems that peak moves farther and farther away. This is especially common in medicine as we go through four years of college, four years of medical school, anywhere from three to seven years of residency, fellowships that can be one to three years, and some people complete multiple fellowships! It's a long, arduous journey to reach the top of that mountain that requires a lot of grit and motivation, both of which are easily lost when *only* focusing on the peak. Before you climb to the next peak, look back down the mountain. Reminding yourself of how far you've already climbed will give you the boost of confidence you need to reach the next step. As you look back down the "mountain," make sure you recognize your constant pillars of support—your friends and family (including your FAU Owl Family)! We will always be here for you!

As you embark upon the next phase of your lives in the "real world," reflect on how much has improved but remember how much there is still left to do. You all will leave an indelible mark on this world, and I can't wait to watch! Thank you and congratulations again!