A DECADE OF MUSINGS

Ten years ago, we launched our Medical Musings writing contest not knowing what sort of response we would get.

We suspected that many physicians and medical students had stories to tell, but we didn’t know whether they would actually put pen to paper. We were surprised by the number of heartfelt essays, poems and stories we received that year and have been each year since.

We’ve learned that for some, the contest is the nudge they need to get going on their writing. For others, it’s permission to take a break from their busy days and process what’s going on around them. And for all, it’s the opportunity to share a piece of themselves with their colleagues.

In celebration of the contest’s 10-year anniversary, we are holding a Hippocrates Café event on September 19 at the Mill City Clinic. Actors from the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis will read some of the winning entries from the past decade. You’ll find details in upcoming issues of Minnesota Medicine.

We would like to thank all who entered our contest this year. As always, choosing winners is never easy.

In the following pages, you’ll find the top physician and medical student entries, “Blind” by Michael Shreve, M.D., a St. Paul pediatric pulmonologist, and “Walking Alone” by Lillian Johnson, who is starting her third year of medical school at the University of Minnesota. Over the coming months, we will publish the poems and essays that received honorable mention (see box on page 30). Be sure to watch for them.
For Michael Shreve and his siblings, writing poetry is a family affair. His brother, Paul, had published several books of poetry before he died of liver cancer in 2009. His sister, also a poet, has had some of her poems published online.

Shreve, a pediatric pulmonologist with Children’s Respiratory and Critical Care Specialists in St. Paul, came later to the game of poetry writing, having just started last year. “Because of my brother and sister, I think I got the courage,” he says.

Shreve had plenty of material to work with. For years, he has carried in his briefcase a journal into which he records observations and thoughts. “I write things when I think of them or see them,” he says. Shreve thought the notes might one day come together in a novel. “But I started looking at the things I had been writing, and it didn’t look like they would be pieces of a bigger story.”

They have, however, provided the scaffolding for his poetry. The inspiration for his winning poem, “Blind,” came from his notes about two individuals. One was a boy he met during residency who didn’t want to be sedated for an outpatient procedure. Even though everyone assured him he would be all right and that it would keep him from feeling pain, it didn’t make a difference. “We all thought he was crying about the pain,” Shreve says. “But it was really about the fact that he would have to stop playing videogames, which the hospital had but he didn’t have at home.”

The other was a woman who had cancer. When the woman’s friends asked what they could do to help her, she told them to make curtains for one of the rooms in her house. The reason for such an unusual request: so she could open and close them whenever she wanted. “It was something she had control over when she didn’t have control over anything else in her life,” he says.

Both stories were about the loss of something—the boy’s ability to play video games and the woman’s feeling of being in control.

And they made him think about what it would be like if something important to him, but seemingly unimportant to others, was taken away—in this case, being able to watch the trees change with the season. “I love the look of the trees and I thought if my sight was taken away, I’d still have the sound of my family’s voices and the feel of their faces and people would come up with replacements for everything else, but that would be something I would never again have. And it would be hard to describe to other people why it was important.”

Although Shreve doesn’t often share his writing with others, he sent a copy of one poem that was published in a recent Minnesota Medicine to the parents of the child whose story inspired him. “Rose” described physicians keeping a baby girl alive until her parents could get to the ICU to be with her when she died. “I got the nicest letter back. It turned out the very day they got the magazine, their other child went to the ER with seizures. He turned out to be fine. But the mother looked at the fact that it happened on the same day as a sign, and that was very cool.”

Blind
BY MICHAEL SHREVE, M.D.

For months
Wondered what he would miss most
Now he knows

Leafless branches on the trees
Black elm tributaries draining sky to trunk
Maple sticks not fiery leaves
Halloween oaks of Irving and Poe
Black, curving, tapering to air
Gossamer endings
Uninterested in wind, rooted to sky
Against the flaming sunset, sunrise
Twice daily, if he was lucky
God’s shadow puppets, but still
Too intricate for art, science
That is what he would miss most

Macular degeneration, his doctor said
He had read about it, understood
Preoccupied with what he would miss most
Mind cataloged lists
When it is all gone
Now he knew

It should be her face
But it would endure, imperishable
Smiling more. No frown lines, ever
Or the little ones
They would grow by words, changing voices
Awkward squeaking, stories
Blind is love

The black, leafless branches
Pasted on red sky
That is what he would miss most
Wondered how long he could stand
Not seeing that
Lil Johnson has a love-hate relationship with writing. “I enjoy it,” she says. “But at the same time it can be really tedious, and I feel like when I write something, it’s never complete.”

That was in part why she ignored English teachers in Alaska, where she grew up, who encouraged her to think about becoming a writer. “I couldn’t see myself as a writer,” she says. “I figured I would be one of those people who would be holed up at home and wouldn’t finish anything for years. I didn’t want to do that.”

What she wanted to do, as she mentions at the beginning of her winning essay “Walking Alone,” was become a doctor. “I don’t have a good reason as to why—I didn’t for my [medical school] interview, either. They say you’re not supposed to say you want to help people—that it’s too cliché. But that’s really what it’s all about. Ever since I was really little, I knew it’s what I wanted to do,” she says.

More specifically, Johnson wants to one day return to Alaska to work in a facility that serves Native Americans. She says that desire was what brought her to the University of Minnesota’s Duluth Medical School, where she recently finished her second year. “Alaska doesn’t have a medical school, so I applied to the campus in Duluth because I liked the small class sizes and because they have an emphasis on Native American care,” she says.

Although as a medical student she has had to do writing assignments—to reflect on things that happened during training—her winning story didn’t grow out of one of those exercises. Rather, it was the product of a sleepless night. “I decided to write what I was feeling to get it all out and clear my head,” she says. “I’m the type who represses things. I don’t think about it, and that’s why every now and then something will bother me, and writing helps me get it out.”

In this case, writing helped her process what she was feeling about her life and her role in medicine. Although the essay was initially done for her own benefit, she decided to enter it in Minnesota Medicine’s writing contest when she got an email about the contest from a mentor, who had read some of her reflections and encouraged her to flesh them out and submit them for publication. “That’s when the wheels started turning,” she says. “I decided it was worth a shot.”
Walking Alone

BY LIL JOHNSON

Little girl is asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” “Doctor,” she replies, beaming. Then little girl with a Brady Bunch life, the whole world in front of her, grows up.

Jaded by a life turned sour, teenaged girl is asked what her future plans are. “I’m not going to college,” is her bitter response. College happens regardless, probably because she doesn’t know what else to do. Then graduation, magna cum laude, head held high, a happy moment. She looks for her family afterward, only to be told her father didn’t come, didn’t watch her walk. A stunning slap in the face, even after years of disappointment that should have prepared her for this. She wanders away, tears streaming down her face, the girl who doesn’t cry. She stays down for some years, defeated, ambition creeping away. She is lying still, staring at the same place on the wall, finding shapes in the plaster like children do with clouds—lying on the grass, the sun in their face … distant, happy memories. She tries to block out the screams from behind the door, the berating voice telling her she is nothing, will be nothing.

The years go on, the screams continue, her skin grows thick, determined. “What will you do now,” she asks herself. “I’m going to be a doctor,” is her hardened, driven response.

Brown girl in a sea of white, skin and garments both. Sticks out like a sore thumb at this momentous ceremony, the pitiful kid with no family. Her name is read, she walks across the stage, shrugs into the white coat placed over her shoulders and thinks about how no one is watching. No one cares. Right then she says a prayer, asking that her mom live long enough to watch her walk that final walk, confessing to him that she might not come back to start second year—she is going home to Alaska for the summer. She is afraid she will find that death is near her family and then she won’t be able to leave them. One parent is gone, the other is not well.

She is dropping her Minnesota friend off for the last time and she had practiced harder on steadying the cracks in her voice. Training her eyes to stay dry, her lip to not quiver. Years of crying, years of depression and poverty, depression and mental health disorders. She thinks about all the other places she should be, not here in medical school, so far from home—away from the people who matter to her. “What am I doing? Why does this feel so selfish?”

“At some point in your life, you have to be selfish,” he tells her. They are sitting in her car. It’s dark out and rain blankets the windshield, replacing the tears she cannot shed. Years of training her eyes to stay dry, her lip to not quiver. She wishes she had practiced harder on steadying the cracks in her voice. She is dropping her Minnesota friend off for the last time and confessing to him that she might not come back to start second year—she is going home to Alaska for the summer. She is afraid she will find that death is near her family and then she won’t be able to leave them. One parent is gone, the other is not well. She’s terrified. She can’t walk across that stage again knowing no one is watching.

She leaves for the summer, the situation at home is not ideal, but something makes her return to Minnesota. Selfishness perhaps? She lives for the patient contact. She works at a clinic full of patients with challenges: alcohol and drug abuse, homelessness and poverty, depression and mental health disorders.

She is told there is a man in room 7, history and physical needed. She leaves for the summer, the situation at home is not ideal, but something makes her return to Minnesota. Selfishness perhaps? She lives for the patient contact. She works at a clinic full of patients with challenges: alcohol and drug abuse, homelessness and poverty, depression and mental health disorders.

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ON THE COVER

they need. At some point he stops and apologizes, considers aloud how she probably has no idea what he’s talking about. She pauses, cautious. How much of her own background is appropriate to share with a patient? She doesn’t want to overstep her boundaries. She takes a leap and confides details about her life. They share many of the same hardships. His eyes grow wide, then his tears come. He cries for her, how beautiful. She keeps composed, as she is so accustomed to doing, and tells him how she has made it through the darkness. They talk forever, and as she leaves he expresses gratitude, praises her as a future doctor, tells her preceptor that this girl made his day.

She realizes, in a way, she has a gift. She wears a white coat, a symbol of prestige, still she is one of them—a brown girl with a broken life, pieces glued together. As much as she hates the suffering she has endured, she realizes it has given her the ability to relate to her patients, earning their respect, touching their lives.

She walks away, head held high, a happy moment. Perhaps she is walking by herself, yet never alone, and it is a very, very full life.

HONORABLE MENTION

Honorary MD
Marianne Bernadino
medical student

Check Meds
Benjamin Marsh
medical student

Adeline
Margaret Nolan, M.D.

Diastole
Diane Pittman, M.D.

My First Delivery in Africa
Pete Olsen, M.D.

These pieces will be published in future issues of Minnesota Medicine.

Building a Direct-Pay Independent Practice

Thrive, Not Just Survive

Workshop for Physicians, Surgeons, and Other Health Care Professionals

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Marble Falls, TX

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St. Louis Park, MN

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Osakis, MN

Chris Foley, MD
Minneapolis, MN

Robert Sewell, MD
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Lee Hieb, MD
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