

HONORABLE MENTION FROM THE PRACTICING AND LIFE MEMBER CATEGORY

Fulfillment



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It's hot out here and my quads are burning. I can't remember what mile I just passed, but I do know that the next mile is not coming soon enough. I may be running, but I feel like I'm in slow motion. The sweat on my neck has turned to salt, and I'm starting to wonder why running a marathon seemed like a great idea. I am truly exhausted, both physically and mentally. I start to pump my arms hoping that my legs will follow suit, and that's when I feel that familiar brush against my right arm. I can't help but smile thinking of the day that I met Ms. Dorothea Clark.

The weeks surrounding the holidays are always busy times in hospitals, and this year was no exception. I walked in the doors of the ICU not expecting much. I

was covering for one of my partners who was caring for an 85-year-old lady with multiple myeloma and worsening shortness of breath. After reviewing her thick chart, I walked in her door to introduce myself. Surrounded by numerous family and friends, Ms. Clark greeted me with a wide smile and open arms. I did not know Ms. Clark before that moment, but she sure knew me. She introduced me to her son, Tom, and other family members in the room, then started to tell me about family members I had cared for in the past. I did eventually examine Ms. Clark and ask her how she felt, but her focus was more on me and how she was glad to see me. I left the room with a smile and carried on with my busy day.

The next morning, Ms. Clark's condition worsened. She was somewhat responsive, but I spoke with Tom in length regarding her wishes. Her oncologist visited with the family, and after a long discussion, they agreed to intubation. By the third day, Ms. Clark was unresponsive, and my conversations with Tom became longer. He asked all of the questions that people ask at the end of life. I felt guilty answering them since I had not known her long at all.

By the fourth day, my partner had returned, but I checked in to see how she and her family were doing. They were informed that her prognosis was poor and terminal extubation was recommended. Tom again asked me my opinion. Given that I was not on the case, I tried to defer the question to my partner. He asked me again, this time fighting back tears, and said, "We trust you. She trusts you. What do we do?" I told him I agreed with the recommendations.

The next morning, Ms. Clark was extubated. Something inside me led me to the ICU first. When I entered the ICU doors, the nurse immediately informed me that she had just gone asystole. Surrounded by her entire family, I pronounced her dead. I gave Tom and the rest of her family my condolences, took a deep breath and then started the rest of my day.

Two days later, on my first day off in four weeks, I happened to read Ms. Clark's obituary. I was impressed, but not surprised, by her many accomplishments and her dedication to her family and friends. However, I was surprised to see the last paragraph, not because her family recognized and thanked the hospital and her oncologist, but because they recognized and thanked me. It was right there that I realized the impact of my

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presence, and I started to cry.

At that moment, I was reminded of how little it takes to have a big impact in someone's life. I had known Ms. Clark only for a few short days, but my presence had made a difference in her and her family's life. As physicians, we get so preoccupied in the routine, hectic nature of our day that we forget to stop and enjoy the people who come in and out of our lives. We forget that each patient, each person who walks into our exam room or seeks our advice is an opportunity to make a difference either in their lives or in our own. Once again, I was reminded that patients are more than just diagnoses and symptoms – they are people with emotions and memories. I was given the wonderful opportunity to be a part of Ms. Clark's life, and she taught me that even the smallest actions make the biggest difference. Ms. Clark and her family reminded me of why I had become a physician in the first place – to care for people and to make a difference. In that moment, I felt fulfilled.

I left for Phoenix a week later to run the Phoenix marathon with a group of friends. As part of a long tradition, we pin names of those who inspire us and who have made a difference in our lives on our race jerseys.

That night before the race, I wrote Ms. Clark's name on a white ribbon and pinned it to the back of my jersey. On race morning, I could feel her ribbon brushing my right arm as I walked.

Now, I've just passed mile 25. I'm pumping my arms harder hoping that something is left in my tank. I feel her brushing my arm, as if she's pushing me along. After all, she's pushed me this far. My mind is starting to race. I think about Ms. Clark and all that she represents, the difference she's made in my life and how I am a better physician and a better person because of her and her family. I think about what a privilege it was to be a part of her life, if only for a brief moment. I think about how these next few moments will impact my life forever. The finish is ahead of me now, and my legs pick up the pace. I put my arms up in victory as I cross the line. I'm exhausted yet fulfilled from the journey I have just completed. As I wipe the happy tears from my eyes, I look up to the heavens and say "Thank you." **LM**

Note: Dr. Briones-Pryor practices Internal Medicine with Jewish Hospital & St. Mary's HealthCare-Hospital In-Patient Physician Services.