ERIN SULLIVAN - CLASS DAY ADDRESS, 6/11/11

This day has been many years in the making. Four years is a long time, but really, this story began long before our first 8-hr Kellogg marathon. For some it began with a childhood dream of becoming a doctor. How many of you owned one of those Fisher Price doctor kits with a plastic syringe and stethoscope? Others came to medicine after discovering a love of science in high school or college, perhaps inspired by an outstanding teacher. Still others found our way here after trying our hand at another career. None of us made this journey alone – we are here because of the very special people who sit in our audience today – who always show up for us, and because of many more individuals who could not be here. To everyone who has loved us and believed in us, we thank you.

We have developed from nervous first years to confident fourth years, and yet I would argue that this path is predictable and by no means unique to our school. Most medical students undergo a similar metamorphosis.

So what makes Dartmouth medical students different? Well, for one thing, we are pretty good at living out of suitcases. We’re wizards at figuring out new electronic medical records – I learned 7 in my third year alone. Plus we are accomplished motivational interviewers – we could charm the cigarette right out of a chain smokers tobacco stained fingers. Dr. O’Donnell’s Aretha Franklin impersonation is seared in our collective memory bank. We can identify just about anything under a microscope – remember the fetal finger? Doorknobs and handrails will never look the same to us again after Dr. Pfefferkorn introduced us to the concept of “the fecal veneer.”

Among us are marathon runners, comedians, chefs, musicians, world travelers, activists, but most importantly, friends. I believe camaraderie is the strongest thread in the DMS fabric. I think you will find that few medical students know their classmates as well as we do. We have swatted away fierce Moosilauke mosquitoes, passed
oranges using only our chins, outdone ourselves every year with Halloween costumes...

And I have to say, even if I was exhausted or devastated by something that had just happened with one of my patients, I always brightened when I saw a short white coat approaching, because it meant a friend was close by.

We now know the exhilaration of saving a life, but also the anguish of watching helplessly as a patient suffers. We have learned at Dartmouth that being a good doctor is about more than making the correct diagnosis and treatment plan. When President Kim addressed our class this winter he urged us to set audacious goals, publicize them, and measure our results. With forebears like C. Everett Koop, Jack Wennberg, Elliott Fisher and Dr. Kim, Dartmouth graduates are expected to have an opinion, and to leave each place a little better than we found it. Not only should you, but you must. As Dartmouth President John Sloane Dickey observed, "The world's troubles are your troubles, and there is nothing wrong with the world that better human beings cannot fix." That is the Dartmouth legacy, and it is our turn to bring his words to life.

And now that bond we forged in this idyllic emerald valley will be stretched to its very limits. Our paths diverge, and we will lead very different lives. Whereas some of us will be squeezing into tiny (and I mean tiny) apartments in big cities, others will be spreading luxuriously in 3 bedroom homes. One of us will be in Alaska, another will be cruising in his new BMW through America's Heartland – are they ready for you Pat? Among this sea of black and green are budding surgeons, obstetricians, pediatricians, anesthesiologists, family doctors, neurologists, an emergency physician, a dermatologist, a radiologist a psychiatrist, and a boatload of internists. And Matt, I haven’t forgotten you – he’ll be, and these are his own words, “taking over the world” with “technology and process redesign.” Modest, aren’t we?
My hope is that you will have long, fruitful careers, be present for your loved ones and your patients, and think often of your Dartmouth family. Thank you and congratulations!