**15252, Lionel Fonkoua**  
Good Evening Fellow Students, Esteemed Faculty and Guests,

I have been asked to speak to you today about gratitude, how it affects your life and how you can apply it to your practice of medicine. The best way I can do that is to share my personal experiences.

Ten years ago I came to this country as a young person who had a great desire to study medicine, especially the treatment of cancer. I travelled from my home in capital city of Yaoundé in Cameroon, Africa. It was not a simple matter that English was my second language, but that I spoke almost no English when I came to Miami. Just coming through customs was a huge challenge because of the language barrier. From the time I arrived I had plenty of people try to discourage me that my goal of becoming a doctor would not be possible since I couldn’t speak the language. In addition, all my family support was back in Africa. But, I was determined to accomplish my goal out of gratitude for my grandmother as well as gratitude for the support of my family.

She is the one who stirred my interest in medicine, and the study of cancer. My paternal grandmother passed away from stomach cancer. That’s when I started to learn a little about cancer. I was very intrigued. It’s been a driving force since then. Before she died my maternal grandmother gave me about $2,000 just because she believed in me. That was all she had and she gave it to me. That may not be a lot to people in the United States, but back home it is a year’s savings. Therefore, I was determined to honor her memory, become a doctor, and do cancer research so that others who suffered from cancer could be helped.

I learned very quickly that the language barrier had to be overcome. I did that through an intensive six-month English course at St. Thomas University and passed the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam. My English teachers were wonderful. They encouraged me and mentored me until I completed the course and passed the test, after a lot of work. I have tremendous gratitude for these teachers who helped a young person from South Africa learn the language so that I can fulfill my dream of studying medicine.

I became a student at Miami Dade College to complete my general courses and then I returned to St. Thomas where I interned in a research lab. Since it wasn’t the cutting-edge research I wanted, I applied and was accepted into the 2008 Penn State College of Medicine’s Summer Undergraduate Research Internship Program.

This turned out to be a wonderful turning point. I was very impressed with both the school and the faculty. The research was amazing and I was blessed to be able to work in Dr. Jill Smith’s lab. She was doing both bench and clinical work, or translational research. Dr. Smith is a gastroenterologist, researcher and is now a professor emeritus. As a result of this opportunity I was able to present my work at a national conference and publication. Despite the fact I originally planned to get my Ph.D. to conduct research, that experience changed my path to medical school.

This was an important change for me. I learned how research findings can be put to real life use in treating patients. It really appealed to me to bring findings from the lab to the bedside. If it hadn’t been for the SURIP program and working with Dr. Smith, I don’t think I would be in medical school. She really impacted my career choice.

Although I had applied to and was accepted to several schools, Penn State College of Medicine’s support system was a perfect fit. Dr. Smith was initially an academic mentor but our relationship grew that she’s more like an academic mother now. I decided to come back because of that support system. Being here alone without my family, I figured medical school alone is tough.

As a medical student here, my training was good; the staff, the professors, the quality of the education was excellent. But, it was more than the quality of the education. It’s the supportive environment that’s very important. I received support and encouragement from the faculty, the nurses, and the residents. Everyone was supportive. Even though my family wasn’t here with me, I felt like there was a whole village rooting for me.

I had great mentors in college in every class and every program. You can’t put a price tag on the type and amount of support that I have received in my studies. I decided that I couldn’t let them down. I have had such an Attitude of Gratitude so I promised myself that I wouldn’t quit. I wouldn’t give up.

I’ve decided to stay here at Penn State Hershey to complete my residency in internal medicine because there is a collegial environment that appeals to me. In addition to staying here after my residency and completing a fellowship in oncology and continuing in cancer research, I will still remember my family and my people in Cameroon. Though the country is stable, they have a shortage of doctors. I know of people who go on mission trips to other countries through the Global Health Program and I want to organize something like that once or twice a year to take medical care to those in need in Cameroon.

I know I can’t save the whole country, but I can save a few lives. It’s my way of thanking those who have helped me along the way. “A lot of people have done a lot for me to get to this point,” he said. “I thank God first, because a lot of things have happened that I don’t know how I got through it,” he said. “Then I thank all these people who have supported me. I am so grateful to them that the only way I can thank them is to give back, to do the same for other people.”

This attitude of gratitude also factors into my actual practice of medicine. Many students drop out when it gets tough. It’s hard enough to get a medical degree, but it can be nearly insurmountable if you come from a different culture and speak a different language. I recognized the blessing and good in my life and what I could do to extend that to others.

In caring for patients you see gratitude from a completely different perspective. When you see them struggle with difficult times, you see them get angry and deal with disappointment. As a doctor you work tremendous hours caring for patients, trying to do the best you can for them. Then you combine that with your ongoing rigorous training and the long hours you put in until you reach a point of exhaustion. You can reach a point of discouragement yourself. Then you go back to your grateful patients and you see the result of the long hours and all the hard work. That gives you the strength to bounce back and try once again to make a difference.

As you are here for this retreat I want to encourage you to take time to discover your values, the meaning and purpose of the good times and the bad times. Make sure you exercise plenty of self- care. Take some time for introspection and discover ways to put your feelings into helping others. Learn how to offer compassion to yourself as well as to your patients. Don’t let yourself get to the point of burn out. Take care of yourself body, mind, and spirit because you cannot give out of any empty well. Just as a mother must care for herself if she is going to care for her family, physicians must take good care of themselves if they are to give proper care to their patients.

Whenever I was going through a particularly difficult and exhausting time, I developed a resiliency to any obstacle. I did that when I took the time to pause and to reflect. Then I was able to bounce back do my job the next day.

Wherever you are in your career, whether you are a brand new student, whether you are a resident or whether you are a long time doctor and teacher, you must plant the seed of gratitude. Then you must water it and nurture it so that it grows within you and so that there is always a root of it within you. Then, no matter what you are experiencing, no matter how discouraging it may be, you have that reserve from which to draw. That Attitude of Gratitude will always serve you well whether you deal directly with patients, whether you become a teacher, or whether you go into research. It will be your core strength that will strengthen you as long as you water and nurture it regularly.

It is my hope and desire that you will experience some of that at this wellness retreat so that you may meet all your goals.

Thank you