

My mentor

Faith in the journey: Julie Freischlag, MD, FACS

by Jonathan Bath, MD

I have recently started as a third-year postgraduate student in general surgery at University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA). My rotations will be a rigorous but standard mixture of trauma and gastrointestinal, thoracic, and vascular surgery, which is an expected training pathway for a U.S. graduate in surgery. However, I am not a U.S. graduate, and my career pathway has been anything but standard.

I attribute a large part of my surgical career in the U.S. to an extraordinary mentor in Julie Freischlag, MD, FACS. Applying to surgical residency three years ago, I had sent my application to many top-ranked programs. By January, I had been invited to interview at only two programs. Departing the interview in Professor Freischlag's office in drizzling January rain, all I felt was hope; her positive and encouraging tones were like a bright torch of light in a damp and emotionally turbulent few months.

I matched as a preliminary surgical resident at Johns Hopkins in the intern class of 2006–2007. Professor Freischlag recognized the sacrifices and emotional and financial hardship I had endured in coming here and had the open-mindedness and strength of character that it takes to bring one's professional reputation into question for the sake of someone else's aspirations.

Without a social security number, automobile, cellular phone, or apartment, I would steam my shirt in the hotel shower, hail a cab in the morning and evening, and use a pay phone to call internationally to my parents. Through those trying first few months, I called upon my mentor for advice and direction. Professor Freischlag encouraged, sympathized, and ultimately had enough faith in me to smooth the edges of a raw transition into residency in the U.S.

Two years into residency, I was about to enter probably the most important interview of my career: a categorical surgery position at UCLA. I was reminded when I met the program director how historically UCLA has not taken an international medical graduate into its categorical pro-



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gram. Two weeks passed with no word. I called my mentor and uttered superlatives regarding the position. The job signified my transition from passive onlooker to part of the process, and Professor Freischlag understood the significance of this in my life.

It was after a call from the program director at UCLA that I realized the full extent of my mentor's dedication to my cause. Sitting near the chairman of surgery at a surgical meeting in California, conversation turned to the opening at UCLA. Professor Freischlag handed a folded napkin across the table. "This is the person you need to take in your program. He is perfect for the job."

As I tried to remain composed when replying to the one position that validated the past five years of hard work, the lasting words of the program director at UCLA could not have more greatly underlined the compassion and understanding extended to me by Professor Freischlag. "I look forward to working with you at UCLA. I am expecting great things from a man with such stellar support from his chair." ^Ω

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