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Dr. Babineau – My Mentor, My Friend

A founding member of the Western Tidewater Free Clinic, the Medical Director of the EVMS HOPES Clinic, the Director of EVMS Service Learning, and the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Dr. Teresa Babineau, or Terri as she insists people call her, strikes an imposing figure. From outside of her impressive orbit, I listened to her lectures from the safety of the back row and blurted nervous hellos when I encountered her in the halls of HOPES, the student-run free clinic of Eastern Virginia Medical School. I did not officially meet her until the summer of my M1 year when I worked alongside her at a Remote Area Medical Mission in Wise, VA.

There she was, with all of her fancy titles and responsibilities, sloughing through the ankle deep mud in beat-up tennis shoes, her hair in a casual ponytail. Little did I know that she would become one of the most influential people in my life. Fast forward to now, I am almost finished with my M3 year and closing out my tenure as one of the Co-Directors of HOPES, where I worked closely with Dr. Babineau and our relationship took flight. I found a mentor in Dr. Babineau in a way I had never experienced before, and although I was not fortunate enough to learn from her before making my decision to become a physician, her mentorship has re-affirmed my decision and forever altered the course of my medical career.

She has taught me more than I could ever put into words, but three main lessons will stick with me forever:

1. You are only as great as your team

Despite being incredibly accomplished, Dr. Babineau is the first to recognize the hard work of her colleagues. She has taught me that the best kind of leadership comes from a place of equality rather than superiority. You can often find her working side by side with her team, for no job or task is below her. Always available with a kind word, her leadership style inspires her team to go above and beyond for her. She shows her appreciation for her colleagues often in the simplest of ways, ending every email with an iteration of “Thank you for all that you do – it is surely recognized.”

By endlessly encouraging and lifting up her team, she builds lasting relationships and fosters collaboration. She has shown me that very little can be accomplished without the support of others and that a cohesive team will always be stronger and more effective than an individual. By being a living example of compassionate leadership, she taught me to play to the strengths of my team members, making each person feel unique and essential while increasing productivity and results.

2. Be a bulldog

The world of free clinics teems with roadblocks and pitfalls. There are never enough resources. Every story is touching, and every person deserves health-care, shelter, and basic comforts; however, the world is not fair, and many go without one or all of those things. Dr. Babineau has devoted her life to a fight that she knows she cannot win, but that does not stop her

from fighting fiercely each and every day for those who cannot speak for themselves. From the beginning of our relationship, she has encouraged me to “be a bulldog” as she always says. She has shown me how to never take no for an answer and to push forward despite insurmountable odds.

In fact, she has taught me that odds don’t even matter. She throws her heart and soul into helping the underserved, and her energy is frankly intoxicating. Through her mentorship and guidance, she has taught me to never apologize for being aggressive and to always speak up for what is right and just. Because of her, I will always have a strong voice, and I hope to someday do even half of what she has done for those in need.

3. Everyone has a story; everyone has a past

I would be lying if I said that I didn’t come into medicine with certain prejudices and misplaced ideals. Before meeting Dr. Babineau, I would have never considered working in a free clinic setting. In my mind, it wasn’t hard to get health insurance – you get a job, work hard, and get insurance. I’m not sure where this twisted and naïve view stemmed from, but it was a cornerstone of my social belief system. The idea that the medical disadvantaged were without access due to a failing of work ethic flies directly in the face of everything Dr. Babineau has built with her medical practice and her life. She could easily have shamed me for my opinion, but instead, she humbly showed me her world. She invited me to grow at my own pace and discover the world of the underprivileged in my own way. Very few people in this world are truly without judgement of others, but Dr. Babineau is one of those people if I have ever met one. She taught me how to listen without judgement to the stories of those I served at HOPES, for you can never treat the entirety of a person without understanding where they come from and what they have been through. She showed me through example that the greatest honor in medi-

cine is to be trusted by those who have been failed by all others before.

Through her grace and intractable energy, Dr. Babineau has touched my life. Because of her, I have grown as a person, and I will take her lessons with me as I move forward with my medical career. Through her mentorship, she has shaped the physician I will soon become and ignited in me a new passion for the field of medicine. I am lucky to call Dr. Babineau not only my mentor, but my friend.

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