

## PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

**“Teacher”**

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*The following is an adapted transcript from Dr Steven Lin’s presidential address at STFM’s Annual Spring Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah on May 7, 2025.*

I believe that all that I am, and any good I may have brought into this world, I owe to those who have stood before me: my teachers. Lately, I have struggled to find the right words to talk about the harsh realities of the world we live in, and I find myself reflecting on the teachers who made me, and their lessons that have given me comfort and resolve. This story is dedicated to them—my teachers—and where better to start than with my very first ones.

I was born in Taiwan to a loving family. My parents never got to go to college, but what they lacked in education they more than made up in hard work and love. When I was out of diapers, they left me with my grandma and traveled to find a country for us to escape the specter of war between Taiwan and China. My grandma was a schoolteacher—small and soft-spoken, but full of conviction. She said, “God needed help so He made angels. And angels are actually just teachers in disguise. When you grow up, try to become a teacher.”

Eventually my parents returned to Taiwan and we immigrated to Canada. I got to go to school for the first time, learn English, and make friends—friends who became my most important teachers. While they all made a big impression on me, three in particular left their mark: Melody, who has Down syndrome; Margaret, who has type 1 diabetes; and Ryan, my best friend, who is gay. Though our time together on the playground was always filled with laughter and joy, there were quieter moments when I saw their struggles: Melody’s profound loneliness around her physical appearance; Margaret’s noticeable absence when her diabetes struck; and Ryan’s journey to feel accepted and loved for who he is. Growing up, I didn’t have the vocabulary to understand what I saw. All I knew was this: it felt unfair.

For college, I moved to North Carolina and got to experience America for the first time. During this period, the most

important lessons I learned were not on campus, but out in the community at a transitional facility for homeless families. There I met Tyrone, a baby with congenital short bowel syndrome, and Adam, a young boy with acute myeloblastic leukemia. Both Tyrone and Adam passed away, not because there were no effective treatments, but because a broken system denied those treatments. The discomfort and confusion that I had felt before turned into something else: anger and purpose. I took those feelings with me to medical school.

During medical school, I was mysteriously drawn beyond the campus walls (again!) to a local free clinic serving immigrant families. It was like I wanted to be everywhere *but* the classroom. “Did I make the right choice to go to medical school?” I wondered to myself, “Will I actually find a job that lets me fight for a fairer world, fix a broken system, and care for anyone who walks through the door?”

“Yeah, it’s called family medicine!” Those were the words of Dr Erika Schillinger, my teacher and mentor to this day. Erika found me, saw something in me that I couldn’t see in myself, and set me on the path I walk today. She connected me with Dr Grace Yu, who practiced full-spectrum family medicine at a community-based residency program. When I saw the breadth and depth of what Erika and Grace could do as doctors, I was in complete awe. I knew then: *this* is what I was meant to do. My grandma was right, Erika and Grace are angels disguised as teachers of family medicine.

After graduating from Stanford as the only person in my class to choose family medicine, I went to the residency program where Grace taught. After residency, I decided to return to Stanford and build a stronger primary care community at a school without a department of family medicine. Over the next decade, we transformed the primary care footprint at Stanford from a small, dedicated group of 20 faculty to a powerhouse division over 200 faculty strong.

Lastly, I can’t forget about the newest, most significant teachers in my life: my children. Learning how to be a father has made me a better doctor, a better teacher, and a better human. Perhaps most critically, my children have clarified for

me what this is all about. Why fight for a fairer world, fix a broken system, and advocate for health care for all, if not for our next generation? My children see me as their hero; everything I do now is for me to one day earn that title.

My friends and colleagues, I share my story not because it is unique but precisely because *it is not*. There are over 6,000 stories in STFM that carry the same set of core values.

We are teachers of family medicine. We come from all corners of the world. We are guardian angels disguised as teachers. We see unfairness in the world and it cuts us to our core. We are naturally curious and educated, and we are intrinsically drawn to our communities. We are the most broadly trained and deeply skilled workforce in all of medicine.

We are pioneers and innovators, not martyrs of a broken system and we understand what's at stake.

The other night, my wife and I finished one of our favorite TV shows, *Reacher*. It's about a former military intelligence officer who travels around the country with nothing but a toothbrush, fighting injustice with justice. Family medicine is the Jack Reacher of health care. At the most fundamental level, we just want to fight for the little guys—not with our fists, but with our brains, our hearts, our ideas, and our teaching.

STFM: you are warriors of justice, not babysitters of chaos, and I'm proud to stand with you as your 53rd president. Let's go get 'em!