



Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma

Advancing Science, Fostering Relationships, and Building Careers

### 2025 Oriens Fellow Winning Essay

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Tears stream down my face as my small hands grip as hard as they can. Blood seeps between my white knuckles and clenched fingers. My heart races, and utter terror takes over as I squeeze. The blood comes as fast as the tears. I stare down at my mother—my rock, my everything. Tonight, she decided that she had taken all that she could bear and took a razor to her wrist with the intent to die. My hands grip tighter as the blood continues to well up between my fingers. She gently drifts off to a peaceful sleep, and eventually, the bleeding stops.

That night started like every other. My father came home from work, opened his beer, and, as always, found something wrong. Maybe someone had used too much toilet paper, misplaced a plate in the cabinet or left a crumb on the counter. Whatever it was, it sent our home into a very familiar downward spiral. Things were thrown, the yelling ensued, and the violence began. Mostly, the abuse was verbal, but it eventually escalated into physical harm. My mother bore the brunt of it, and I was always next in line. The pattern was insidious, eating away at the fabric of our home like a parasite, weakening the foundation day by day. That night, it broke something in my mother. As my tiny ten-year-old hands pressed on her self-inflicted wound, the bleeding eventually stopped. The silence that followed was deafening, but when she finally woke up, relief washed over me.

That night was particularly bad, and of course the neighbors heard and called my school again. The next day, I found myself in the office talking to a warm woman with good intentions, something I had done many times before. The words, “You are safe” were an unintentionally empty promise. By that point, I had spoken with many social workers, and none were able to make a difference. I knew how to tell the story and hide the truth because revealing it would leave my mother alone, and I could not allow that.

Over the next several years, the bad days outnumbered the good, but I managed to attend college and eventually I found myself in medical school. During my surgery rotation, one of my first trauma patients was a young woman who had been beaten by her partner. She was battered and bruised, her body painted with various shades of blue, purple and yellow. She insisted that she had tripped and fallen, but her broken nose, bruised face and lacerated kidney told a different story. Despite her injuries, she steadfastly protected her abuser. It was like staring into a mirror. I sank into myself, knowing exactly the internal chasm she was struggling with, even as others expressed their frustrations with her. On call that night, I sat with her, holding her hand as she told me her story. I shared mine too. I listened intently and assured her she was safe with us; this time, hoping I could actually make a difference.

I never expected to become a trauma surgeon, but I now see that this is exactly where I am meant to be. I cannot imagine a world where I don't strive to make a difference in the lives of my patients affected by all types of violence. I want to be a strong advocate for my patients, offering them care and support in their most vulnerable moments, as trauma surgeons often do. It's a privilege to care for people during these times, and I hope to make an impactful difference in their stories. Whether in the operating room, at the bedside or in my patients' final moments, I will provide unwavering commitment, as I did all those years before, never leaving them alone. When I tell a patient, “You are safe” I want those words to convey relief, not the all-too-familiar empty promise.

The patient I met early in my career got away from her abuser during that hospitalization. We connected her with social work and got her to safety. Two years later, she reached out to me, infinitely thankful for my listening ear. She shared pictures of her healthy, happy family, having moved on from her dark past. Every day, she works to distance herself from that past, not letting it define her—something I also strive to do daily. My past does not define me, but it has ignited a fire within me to fiercely care for and protect my patients. Just like a trauma surgeon.