

James Chen

Scholar's Day Speech, April 11, 2007

Thank you Dr. Goodstein for inviting me here to speak at this event. It is an honor to be here with all of you to celebrate the many challenges that we've overcome and the successes that we've achieved in arriving at this moment- so first off, I would like to offer a congratulations to everyone.

We are here today, because we have earned the designation of "scholar," which is, I think, a term that can carry very unique meanings for each and every one of us. My experiences in these last few years have shaped what I have come to see as the meaning of scholarship and I hope to offer everyone here a small piece of my perspective.

It is somewhat ironic that we are awarded these designations for perhaps the shallowest part of what a scholar encompasses – for those grades that show up after every semester on our transcripts. I believe that being a scholar is signified not so much by a collection of 'A's, but by the passion and determination that allow us to achieve that end. Scholarship is about having the curiosity to learn, about being excited to take the harder routes because we know they are more fulfilling than the easier ones that sit right next to them, and ultimately about understanding the reasons why we are learning the things that we are. I think that we all have these attributes within us and we've seen in the classroom how they can help us excel- but I want to talk today actually about two of my experiences outside of those confines, in research and culture.

As a science major, my research has been conducted in a lab, but certainly whatever field you find yourself in, I think you will discover that research embodies many of the same fundamental principles. When I walked into my lab for the first time, I was kind of overwhelmed by all the techniques involved in experimentation – I remember spending my first summer learning how to pipet, run gels, culture cells, etc., things that I had only heard about in textbooks – and I was so excited! I was excited to feel that my hands were finally involved in the science, to feel like I might have a role in something important. And as I continued in research, as I became familiar with those techniques (as everyone does), I was able to look beyond them to the underlying questions and logic that represent the groundwork for research science. I came to realize then that the most important parts of research and of being a scholar come from the ability to look beyond the pages of textbooks, beyond the answers that have already been written, in order to find ways to solve the many mysteries that

still remain. As I look down toward the medical career that I hope to have, I realize that it will be that ability, which will help me treat my patients and contribute something to the field.

The second thing that I mentioned was culture and the connection between this topic and scholarship was not that clear to me in the beginning. When I came to college, I knew only that I wanted to do something with my Chinese-American heritage- fill in some of the gaps that emerged from growing up here in this country, and if I could, give back to the community that has shaped so much of who I am. It took some searching, but this year I found a way to achieve that goal – I helped to start a group that supports orphans in China and teaches adopted Chinese children here about the language and tradition. And what that really means of course is that I've been spending a lot of time figuring out things that I don't know about my own culture. This opportunity to teach these children has shown me the significance of scholarly interest as a way to connect people, and as a way to inspire others – in this case, to inspire a new generation of kids – to find the enthusiasm to one day search for the answers to their own questions. And maybe more importantly, it has shown me that some of the best knowledge that you can gain as a scholar, some of the most interesting pursuits that you can follow, are those that ask questions about yourself.

So I'd like to leave you today with one final idea about being this word, "scholar." This weekend I came across a political cartoon based on embryonic stem cell research, the field that I study in lab. It had a picture of these scientists huddled around their lab benches in their labcoats looking very professional and nerdy. And at the top, it read, "While experts remain at odds over the issue of when life begins, most agree it's sometime after work." And so, I thought it was funny cartoon – it definitely pokes fun at the more tedious parts of our scholarly endeavors. But I think it makes you realize also, that the most meaningful part of being a scholar is the fact that the fun and work in our lives can often coalesce; that if we can discover the directions that we are interested in, if we know why we are passionate about these goals, that we will be able to accomplish something great. Everyone here today has so many talents including the propensity to learn and to lead, and for me, being a scholar means that we will use this potential to achieve the most meaningful aspirations that we can reach.