

MIZZOU

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[Home](#) » [Winter 2008](#) » [Around the Columns](#) » Patients as teachers

Around the Columns

Patients as teachers

“Sometimes we think when students leave medical school, they’ve left their teachers behind,” says Elizabeth Garrett, professor of family and community medicine. “But in fact, they’ll be surrounded by teachers their whole life.”

That notion is the reason behind the Legacy Teachers program, begun in 2006. To participate, third-year medical students write essays nominating patients who taught them valuable lessons.

Now a fourth-year medical student, Kerry Massman of Warren, Mo., shared her essay at the 2007 Legacy Teachers luncheon. Massman nominated an elderly patient who cared for her husband in the late stages of Parkinson’s disease. The patient’s husband would call out to her when he was about to fall, and she would rush to his side, Massman wrote. “She would put her right arm around his waist and they would fall together ‘just to ensure he did not break any bones or injure himself.’

“To me, it is this story that defines [this patient]. She is not an 88-year-old with a medical history significant for osteoarthritis, degenerative joint disease, restless leg syndrome, hypertension, vertigo, hypothyroidism, glucose intolerance, and so on. Instead she is a woman who loves her family and would do anything to protect them.

The Legacy Teacher program taught me a valuable lesson: Never judge a patient by his or her problem list. Having this encounter has taught me to grab a chart, leave all preconceived notions at the door and truly engage in conversation with the patient to find out how the illness or illnesses are affecting their quality of life.”



Medical student Kerry Massman learned to listen to her patients, rather than judging them by the problems listed on their charts.

Photo by Rob Hill.

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