Genes are Not Destiny

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Three years ago, when I assumed the Presidency of Yeshiva University, the Albert Einstein College of Medicine (AECOM) held a conference in honor of my investiture. The conference, which was titled “The Jewish Genome: Fact or Fancy,” probed into many of the ethical issues that arise from delving into the Jewish Genome. Dr. Dominick Purpura inscribed my program to the conference, “To Richard: Genes are not destiny. They tell us what we are, NOT what we can become.” I believe that this inscription perfectly epitomizes AECOM under Dr. Purpura’s stewardship. That is why I framed the program with Dr. Purpura’s inscription and it proudly hangs on my office wall. Dr. Purpura took a medical school with good genes and wonderful potential, and with his vision for greatness, fashioned the school into the marvelous gem that it is today.

Even before arriving at AECOM, Dominick Purpura was well known in the world of medicine and particularly in the world of neuroscience. In 1949, when he was but a young college graduate, Dr. Purpura established the first laboratory for neuroscience in the United States. Since then, Dom has grown into a premier researcher and scholar, particularly in the field of neuroscience. He first came to AECOM in 1967 as a Professor of Anatomy and Chairman of the Department of Anatomy. Shortly thereafter, in 1969, he became the scientific director of our Rose F. Kennedy Center for Research in Mental Retardation. By 1972, Dominick Purpura was serving as the overall director of the Kennedy Center and from 1974 onwards he served as Professor of Neuroscience at AECOM as well. Sadly in 1982, Dr. Purpura, much to our chagrin, left Yeshiva for the sunnier pastures of Stanford University where he assumed the position as Dean of the School of Medicine. However, this master of neuroscience soon realized that although his heart may have drawn him to California, his brain was seriously missed back in New York. We are very fortunate that Dom chose again to make AECOM his home. He returned to AECOM in 1984 as Marilyn and Stanley M. Katz Dean, and a short three years later was named University Vice President for Medical Affairs. Since then, all of us at Yeshiva have benefited from his wise counsel and his deep insight into medical affairs.

I have been a personal beneficiary of Dr. Purpura’s decision to return east. Since I assumed the Presidency of Yeshiva, I have closely interacted with Dom. He has introduced me not only to the goings on at AECOM, but has served as a personal tutor to me, introducing me to many essential concepts of basic science. As I have come to learn, basic science stands at the core of all research.

All the good that AECOM has done in its 50 year history and all of the good which it will do in the next 50 years stems from an acute appreciation of basic science. Dom has taught me what genes really are and we have worked closely together to see what they can do.

Dr. Purpura took the good genes of AECOM and made them great. He seriously increased the quality of our medical education by partnering us with some of this nation’s premier hospitals. Today AECOM is world renowned as a premier school of medicine and sits at the hub of a network of five major hospitals throughout the New York metropolitan area. Our medical students are afforded training opportunities with some of the nation’s best doctors and master techniques that are on the cutting edge of the field. We are tremendously grateful to Dom for assuring our medical school’s leadership position in education, clinical research, and patient care. I am certain that AECOM will build upon his foundation and grow into an even stronger and more vibrant institution to advance medicine, science, and humanity.

Dr. Dominick Purpura has dedicated much of his adult life toward the understanding of the human brain. He is internationally renowned for his studies of brain abnormalities, which lead to mental retardation, and is widely recognized for his work on brain waves. He is a past president of the Society for Neuroscience and the International Brain Research Association. For over 25 years, Dr. Purpura served as the chief editor of the prestigious scientific journal Brain Science. It is safe to say that Dominick Purpura is not only a great expert on the human brain, he is one of the great human brains. Dom is a true Renaissance man; a world class medical scientist as well as an accomplished artist and community leader. He never ceases to amaze me with his erudition, his wisdom, and above all, his good cheer. It is no wonder that this extraordinarily talented and brilliant man would become the longest serving dean of any medical school in the United States.

As I understand it, Dominick Purpura’s greatness stems from the way he heeds the words of our namesake, Albert Einstein. Einstein once explained his recipe for living a meaningful life. He said, “Strive not to be a success but to be of value.” Dominick Purpura is the rare individual whose life story is the story of value, contribution to science, to society and to humanity. Without doubt, he has done so much good because he never saw genes as a limit.