

EAST Oriens Award for Careers in Trauma Essays

Winning Essay by Joseph V. Sakran, MD, MPH

Laying semi-conscious on the gurney, I could sense the frantic commotion of healthcare workers bustling around me in the trauma bay. Donned in protective equipment from head-to-toe, like a man on the moon, all I could see were the eyes of the trauma surgeon as he hovered over me. Those eyes reflected both intense concentration and fierce determination to save my life. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but my memory of that face is worth a million.

Only hours before, I had been a healthy 17-year old student at a high school football game. One moment I was simply an innocent bystander, and the next I became collateral damage as a violent fight broke out after the game and a 38-caliber bullet ripped through my throat, lodging in my shoulder. Nearly unconscious at the time, I still can vividly see the expressions on the faces of the many people trying to help me that day. The chaos around me in the trauma bay filled me both with fear and awe – fear that I might die and awe at the fearless purpose of the medical personnel fighting to save my life. A prolonged hospital stay, and many operations, gave me a second chance. As an aspiring trauma surgeon today, I hope to give others the same second chance that I received.

Throughout my general surgical residency, I have been fortunate to take part in many valuable experiences, ranging from treatment of abdominal tuberculosis in Malawi to mass casualty incidents in Jerusalem. By far, my most unforgettable experiences have come from rotating on the trauma service. While rounding one morning as an intern, my attending brought me to the ER for a consult. The patient had been involved in a motor vehicle collision, and was complaining of significant chest pain. Within minutes, she lost her vital signs and my attending called for a thoracotomy tray. As an intern interested in trauma, my adrenaline was flowing as I watched one of the surgeons systematically make one meticulous life-saving decision after another to save this woman's life. Grace under pressure, methodically making the correct decisions in the correct order are the abilities I have begun to develop during my residency, and I hope to refine and improve upon during a career in trauma.

Acute care surgery has garnered my greatest interest and attraction during my residency. My decision to become an acute care surgeon has no doubt been greatly affected by the fact that I am alive due to the skill of a trauma surgeon. I envision a career in emergency general surgery, critical care, and trauma. My goal is to practice in an academic setting, including international work in the field of public health. It is my hope that others will follow the leadership of EAST to continue fostering an environment for the advancement in the care of injured patients.

I know that a career in surgical critical care and trauma will be intellectually, emotionally, and physically challenging, but I believe the refinement and expansion of my skills, both domestically and abroad, will meet those challenges. My objective is to spend several years in an academic training program that will provide state of the art practice and research, under the guidance of expert mentors, who will train me to become the best acute care surgeon I can be. The breadth of my education and experience to date has endowed me with an open, curious, and disciplined mind, which should provide a strong foundation for future success in a career tailored towards the care of injured patients.