

Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation
Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 6
Interview with Geoff Stetson

Holly J. Humphrey, MD, MACP (HJH):

Welcome back to [Vital Voices](#), a podcast from the [Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation](#). I am Dr. Holly Humphrey, president of the Foundation. Our third season of Vital Voices focuses on the [2023 cohort of Macy Faculty Scholars](#); six individuals chosen to participate in our two-year [Macy Faculty Scholars](#) career development program because of their demonstrated potential as future leaders in medical or nursing education. I am delighted to have the opportunity to share our Scholars' stories with you, as I think you are going to find their work to advance health profession's education, and their own personal experiences and perspectives, to be inspiring.

Today's interview is with [Dr. Geoff Stetson](#), an Associate Professor of Medicine and Medical Education at the University of Illinois Chicago College of Medicine. He is also the Director of Clinical Faculty Development at the UIC College of Medicine. Dr. Stetson has a longstanding interest in medical education, and has received multiple teaching awards from learners, peers, and leadership. As a faculty member at the University of California, San Francisco, his home institution before moving to UIC, Dr. Stetson was inducted into the Academy of Medical Educators. Some of our listeners may recognize Geoff as a member of the [MedEd Tag Team](#), a group of medical educators who share evidence-based medical education practices via social media. If you are not familiar with their content, I suggest you check them out.

As a Scholar, Dr. Stetson is leveraging his skills with technology to investigate how master researchers in health professions education utilize theoretical frameworks and make them accessible to mentees. Lessons learned from this investigation will inform the study of his [MedEdMentor.org](#) website, an interactive website for novice scholars from diverse backgrounds to foster scholarship, mentorship, and community. In the spirit of full disclosure, I must also add that Dr. Stetson is a graduate of the University of Chicago's Pritzker School of Medicine, during which time I was his Dean for Medical Education. And now here is my conversation with Dr. Geoff Stetson.

Holly J. Humphrey, MD, MACP (HJH):

Geoff, as always, it's wonderful to talk with you. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Geoff Stetson, MD (GS):

The pleasure is mine, as always.

HJH:

Okay. So as I mentioned in my introduction, our relationship predates both of our involvement with the Macy Foundation. You were a student at the University of Chicago when I was Dean for Medical Education. And not only were you a student, you were also what we called a Pritzker Chief, which is a role modeled after that of a chief resident in a residency program, and one that I think perhaps signaled your interest in medical education. Can you begin by telling our audience today about your path to medicine, and to medical education in particular?

GS:

I'd love to, and thank you for that question. So my path to medicine wasn't predestined, necessarily. I went into undergraduate training thinking I would become either an architect or an engineer. Which is

Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation
Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 6
Interview with Geoff Stetson

interesting, thinking about the kinds of projects I've taken on since that time; they're all kind of design and building. But I did not think I would go into medicine. The foundations were set by my family. My mom was a nurse practitioner and my dad was a biology professor, so I had the kind of clinical side through my mom, and my dad was very scientifically oriented, so everything was there. And then just as I went through my coursework in undergrad, and also personal focus and emphasis on social justice, medicine just became more clearly the path for me. So I ended up majoring in biology, and completing all the pre-med coursework that was necessary. So that's what brought me to medicine.

Medical education, on the other hand, is a different story. So I grew up with this dad who was a biology professor. And we had a chalkboard in our kitchen, right next to the table we all ate our meals at. So anytime there was a question, things would devolve into some sort of chalk-talk, and it was fun and annoying at the same time. If I ever had a question for him, he would never tell me the answer, or it would always become this Socratic situation.

So I was raised in this home, especially with my dad, of just teaching and thinking critically. And I definitely didn't appreciate it at the time, but now I see the value and the hard thinking he made me do. And then I loved to tutor and TA throughout high school and college. But after college, I went and spent a year in Nicaragua doing public health and community development work.

And as part of that, part of what we did was teach English. So I became the head of our English department, if you want to say. But I was designing curriculum for a beginner, intermediate, and advanced English course every week for a year. And I just really loved that process of curriculum development. I saw it as this really creative process. You can kind of make it a game, you can make it a puzzle. And so I just saw curriculum development as a way to inject some fun into learning. And that really got me excited about teaching, and just engaging with learners.

Then, as you know, I left Nicaragua and came to Pritzker where I met you, and all the wonderful teachers at Pritzker. And this is kind of where things got a little confusing for me.

So, Pritzker was amazing, and I loved medical school. And you created this wonderful environment for all of us to learn, and so many amazing opportunities. The teaching was excellent, and Dean Arora has continued everything that you've built.

But medical education, and now I'm stepping away from Pritzker and University of Chicago, there were problems with the education at Pritzker. And now that I'm beyond that institution, I just see it's nothing about Pritzker, it's about medical education. It's about the system that we all have trained in.

And when I see a problem in an area that I'm passionate about, I can't help but want to dive in headfirst. And that's what brought me to medical education.

And then I had the real fortunate opportunity to go to UCSF, which is another powerhouse of medical education. With similar issues, systemic issues of medical education that needed help. And now I'm at a third institution, UIC, that has another all-star cast. So I've been deliberate in finding places and getting opportunities to be at places where there are people who can help me on this journey as I try to make a difference.

HJH:

Well, Geoff, listen. We are so glad that you jumped in headfirst to tackle some of the seemingly intractable problems and challenges in medical education, and health and healthcare. And I want to have our audience hear a little bit about the project that you are working on as a Macy Faculty Scholar. Because I remember when you interviewed, our National Advisory Committee was intrigued by and

Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation
Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 6
Interview with Geoff Stetson

excited about the MedEd Mentor website that is at the heart of your Scholars project. In fact, members of our committee commented that it would actually be a tool that they themselves would use. Now, you have formally launched that website a few months ago, and I'm hoping that you might tell us a little bit about that tool, and how the idea emerged and then became one of your many passion projects.

GS:

I think this project is a microcosm of exactly what I was talking about in medical education. I found a problem that I personally was struggling with, and just wanted to make it better. So as I said, I knew I wanted to get into medical education basically as soon as I started in med school. And I began down that path. And I was coming towards the end of residency, so seven years down the line, and I'd participated in a health professions education pathway at UCSF that, at the time, was led by some legends of the field, including Dave Irby, Pat O'Sullivan, and Bridget O'Brien, who was a fellow Macy Scholar herself. And they tried to impart to all of us these foundational skills in health professions education scholarship.

And I couldn't understand it. It didn't make any sense to me. And I now know why. And the reason being that, growing up in the household I did with the scientist-biologist for a father, and then training in biology and then clinical medicine, I was wrapped up in this idea, some might call it the positivist paradigm, but basically that there's a truth. That there's one answer to our questions, and we can figure out the right answer to those questions.

And that's not necessarily how medical education works. Medical education fits much more into the social science bucket.

And I came to the realization that theories are the tools—theories and conceptual frameworks and theoretical frameworks are the tools—that help us to take these incredibly complex situations that we are approaching in medical education, and break them down into manageable pieces, things that we can actually analyze and learn from.

And that took me a long time to learn, and to understand. And when I finally did, my thought was, and the same for medical education, I can make this better for people who come after me. It doesn't have to be this hard for them. And how can I do that? And creating this website was the eventual output of that.

And I do need to shout out my partner here, Greg Ow. So Gregory Ow, he's currently a third-year internal medicine resident at UCSF. I was his assigned medical student coach when he first started med school. So I met him on his first day of med school, and mentored him through his four years in medical school. And he is a brilliant, humble individual who helps turn dreams into reality. So this would not exist without Greg Ow.

So that was the problem. Getting engaged in medical education is hard, and I want to make it easier for people. So what we've been trying to do is essentially build a virtual mentor—this website that will help guide people through all the steps of, coming to understand those realizations I had about medical education and then translating that understanding into their projects, into their questions that are important to them in their educational settings.

And another thing that's motivating this, as I mentioned, these amazing places I've gotten to learn; University of Chicago, UCSF and now UIC. And I've been really fortunate and privileged to be surrounded by experts such as yourself, and all those who work at these other institutions. And not everyone has access to the kind of resources that are available at these places. And that shouldn't be the case.

**Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation
Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 6
Interview with Geoff Stetson**

HJH:

Let's take a look back to the Macy Faculty Scholars Program for a minute. You're still in your first year of that program as a Scholar. Tell us a little bit about what that experience has been like for you so far.

GS:

It's been unbelievable. It's been better than I could have ever imagined. I was thinking about this the other day, it's kind of like Space Camp. I never went to Space Camp, but I can imagine that just really excitable, nerdy people who love the same thing, all getting to be together, kind of secluded from the world and just getting to nerd out together.

This past summer's Macy Annual Meeting, I think it's called, was the single-handedly best conference meeting I've ever been to. I was starstruck many times, but everyone was so warm, friendly, welcoming and humble. And I immediately felt brought into the group, even though I was brand new. And we all share the same passion, but very different skill sets and approaches, and I learned so much from many different people.

The interprofessionality of it is so cool. There's some amazing nursing leaders in the group that I got to meet who taught me a lot. I think I learned probably the most from my nursing colleagues at the meeting. So I could not be happier. This is a real dream come true to be at your Space Camp, Holly.

HJH:

Well, Geoff, we are absolutely thrilled to have you. And I know that those who are interacting with you have that same kind of starstruck quality that you have for them. And I'm looking forward to your ongoing interaction with us in the years ahead.

But I know that right now, in addition to your work as a Macy Faculty Scholar, you have a very important position at UIC as Director of Clinical Faculty Development, where I believe you're spending a good portion of your time helping faculty advance their own career goals. So for the learners who are listening and aspiring to a career as a leader in medical education, what tips or advice do you have for them?

GS:

I definitely don't have foolproof advice, nothing I can say definitely led me here. But I can talk about some attitudes and behaviors that I think have served me well in this journey, and the first is curiosity. I am never-endingly curious, I always want to know how things work and how to make things better.

Any time I'm offered an opportunity to participate in something or learn about something, I really want to do it. It's been a problem for me, taking on too many things in the past. So something, I've had to tamp down my curiosity a little bit to make sure I stay focused.

But when you find something that — there's that phrase, if you find something you love, you'll never work a day in your life, this is a tempered version of that. Find something you're curious about and it'll drive you to just have as much fun as you can in that pursuit of learning more.

Sometimes work is just work and you have to do it, but if you have that curiosity, and you want to know more, and you want to solve a riddle or a problem, that will serve you really well.

Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation
Vital Voices — Season 3, Episode 6
Interview with Geoff Stetson

The other thing is don't fear failure. I won't say — embracing failure is hard, so I won't ask people to do that. I'm getting to that place where I am embracing failure and try to fail as spectacularly as I can. But I want people to not fear.

It's the Wayne Gretzky quote, "You'll miss a hundred percent of the shots you don't take." So you just got to keep shooting and not worry if you're going to miss. Because you won't make any goals if you don't take the shot. So don't fear failure, just keep trying, shooting for your goals, and something will stick.

HJH:

Geoff, I really love that. I resonate with both of those qualities, the curiosity and don't fear failure, so thank you for those tips.

Unfortunately, our time is at an end today for the purpose of the podcast, but I want to thank you for taking your time to share your story and insights with me and with our listeners. As is true for all of our Scholars, you are making such a significant and positive impact with your Scholars project, and clearly you're having a very positive impact on your home institution as well as more broadly.

Your work and innovation in the tech space through your website, as you've already described for our listeners today, is reaching audiences that go way beyond UIC, way beyond the Macy Foundation and are reaching parts of the world that otherwise may not have any access to the kinds of thinking and opportunities and tools that you have on that website.

So we want to wish you all the best as you continue to develop and assess the impact of your MedEd mentor website. And we look forward to hearing your update at the next Macy Faculty Scholars Annual Meeting in June. So thank you, Geoff.

GS:

I can't wait, Holly. I'll see you at Space Camp.

HJH:

Okay!

Thank you for listening, and we hope you'll share this conversation with others. You can find this and all episodes of the Vital Voices Podcast on the [Macy Foundation website](#). We hope you will subscribe to the series so that you won't miss other conversations with the 2023 Scholars.

We are now accepting applications for the [2025 cohort of Macy Faculty Scholars](#). You can learn more, and apply, via our website, www.macyfoundation.org. The application portal will close on September 15th, 2024.