

USUHS Graduates to “Care for Those in Harm’s Way”

As the soon-to-be graduates of medical school and the Graduate School of Nursing of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS) paced the hallways of Constitution Hall on the morning of May 17, the surrounding crowds chatted excitedly. Most of these students and their families have looked forward to this day for many years, and during the final minutes before this landmark ceremony these great expectations showed. Lt. Paul Gerald Albers, a USUHS graduate, accurately summed up the emotion: “This is one of the best feelings in the world.”

Just days prior, the class of 2008 gathered on campus for a weeklong celebration of their academic achievements in medicine, graduate biomedical sciences and advanced practice nursing. Every year, USUHS hosts this “Research Week” event to offer students, faculty and staff the opportunity to collaborate with one another and promote their research. But for the graduating class, Research Week 2008 was also a celebration and a prelude for Commencement.

One medical student, Lt. Edward Jones, was given the opportunity to speak at the graduating class’ academic awards ceremony. During his address, Jones revealed his deep appreciation for the love and friendship he came to share with his classmates. “I joined the Army in search of a family that I never had,” said Jones, as he began his speech. “When a soldier finds himself under fire, the only guy he cares about is the guy on his left and his right. They’re his buddies, they’re his brothers, he’d do anything for them and they’d do anything for him. And you are my brothers and my sisters, and I would do the same for you – everyone in the class of 2008.”

Without a doubt, the men and women of the class of 2008 will remember and cherish their experience at USUHS throughout their careers. But Dr. Larry Laughlin, dean of the F. Edward Hébert School of Medicine, added that this graduating class should also leave USUHS with a strong conviction. As he spoke, he emphasized that the journey does not end at graduation – it begins.

“I believe that this group of people is gifted, that’s the good news,” Laughlin said. “The bad news is that with great gifts come great expectations, and with great expectations comes great responsibility.”

Three days later, as the class of 2008 patiently waited for the moment they would receive their diplomas, Dr. Elias A. Zerhouni, director of the National Institutes of Health, reinforced Laughlin’s claim during his commencement speech, reminding graduates of the great task ahead. Zerhouni, who has been practicing and teaching medicine for more than 30 years, not only warned this class of the awesome responsibility of medical stewardship, but also clued them in on a very real goal that he says, must be achieved.

“Medicine cannot stay as we know it today. It will not serve our country as we know it today. It has to transform itself from a medicine where we waited for disease to strike the patient to intervene, to a medicine where we will be preempting disease because we

understand disease at a more fundamental level than we did twenty years ago,” Zerhouni said.

As the graduates received their diplomas, Rear Adm. Steven K. Galson, acting surgeon general of the United States, beamed with pride alongside Air Force Surgeon General Lt. Gen. James G. Roudebush and the rest of the official party. Once the last diploma had been awarded, the concert hall overflowed with celebration as roars of applause burst from a crowd of more than 3,500.

Having officially entered their professional careers as physicians, biomedical scientists and advanced practice nurses, the class of 2008 dressed in their new uniforms and ranks, transforming the front rows of Constitution Hall into a spectacle of Navy whites, Air Force blues and Army greens. The United States Marine Band, “The President’s Own,” played a medley of songs for each service as the country’s newest uniformed health care professionals congratulated each other with proud smiles and handshakes. And as the medical graduates recited the Hippocratic Oath, they officially assumed the responsibility that Dr. Zerhouni, Dr. Laughlin and countless professors throughout their graduate and professional programs had spoken about: the responsibility to protect life.