



Lessons from an old white coat

On June 24, 1970, Robert Watson wrapped up his one-year hospital internship at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. He was heading south to the University of Florida for a neurology residency. He figured he'd never again wear UAB clothing – including the jacket-length white coat he'd worn as an intern.

Most of us would have left it behind. For Watson, though, this was not just any old jacket. On the front were the words “Robert Watson, M.D.” In the pockets were reminders of his first year as a physician.

So he placed it on a hanger in a garment bag. It's still there. And after 40 years, it still fits.

The 120 first-year students and their guests at the August White Coat Ceremony for the Class of 2014 can attest to that. Shortly after Watson began his remarks to the students who soon would receive their own white coats, he removed his coat, reached into the back of the lectern and, surprise, put on a coat that was shorter, yellower and far more memorable.

One by one he went through the pockets, briefly reliving intern days. A box of Roi-Tan cigars, which “all the really cool interns” smoked. A Wint-O-Green mint, to mask the cigar breath of cool interns. Slides from the last



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The white coat still fits, and its pockets are filled with memories. Dr. Robert Watson tells first-year students why the coat still matters all these years later.

patient whose blood he had drawn. And a stethoscope, its rubber no longer flexible but its memories intact.

“This stethoscope heard hundreds of hearts, thousands of lungs,” he told the audience. “What memories this coat and these pockets hold. The white coat is special.”

Watson’s colleague Curtis Stine, M.D., took a different approach in his address to the assembled students. He reminded them that a physician’s life ought to be a life of service. Then he challenged them:

“Who will become the pediatrician in Immokalee caring for children of migrant farm workers? Who will become a general internist at the Community Health Center in Orlando, caring for adults that fall below the poverty level? Who is going to deliver all the babies born in 2016 to single moms in Tampa?

“Who will become the family physician who devotes him/herself to serving a rural community in North Florida? Who will be my geriatrician as I retire, grow old and, eventually, die? To paraphrase the Talmud: ‘If not you, who? If not now, when?’”

Lincoln High student Ziyang Song and other SSTRIDE Summer Institute participants got to experience the lab and other aspects of the College of Medicine.