

Georgia Academy President Dr. Susana Ajoy Alfonso – Reflects on Her Journey to Leadership



Dr. Alfonso was sworn-in at GAFP annual meeting in November. She was installed by AAFP President Sterling Ransome, MD and in a gathering of over 100 friends, colleagues and families – she gave her first speech as chapter president. Below is a selection of her inaugural speech:

First, I would like to thank you again for coming tonight. I'll start with some thank you's, tell you a little bit about my journey in Family Medicine and the GAFP, and end with an invitation.

I'd like to start by thanking my patients who have allowed me the privilege of helping to take care of them and have trusted me to share their life and health journey with them. You have taught me so much! I'd like to thank the many classes of residents whom I've had the privilege to train. I counted 19 alums at this meeting!

I'd like to thank my faculty colleagues who have been a part of my leadership journey from the beginning. A few of them are here tonight and I won't say which ones were interns with me in 1997! I'd like to thank Dr. Ralph Peeler who stopped me in the parking lot behind the now demolished Shallowford hospital and said, "have you thought about getting more involved with the GAFP?" and I said "no" and he said "you should think about it...I think you'd enjoy it" That was 18 years ago.

I'd like to thank my village of friends, some of them are here tonight, many have known me since I was a teenager, who have at times literally carried me through life's challenges.

- I'd like to thank my mom in heaven who inspired me with her courage and willingness to defy the odds.
- My father who loves with consistency and was never ever hesitant to set me straight.
- My step mom who loves blindly and with her actions
- My aunts and my sisters who in so many different ways have supported me as a mom and as a doctor, and a special shout out to my sister Paty who is deployed in Saudi

Arabia who typed up my med school application because I was just home with a newborn baby.

- My sons. I always knew I wanted to be a doctor but when I became a mother realized what my true purpose was and is, whose antics and perspectives kept me grounded...who taught me what it means to love without conditions. You will both always be what I am the most proud of in this world.
- To my husband who has walked every step of this journey with me, for always having a unique, practical perspective. I remember the first time having to tell a patient they might have a cancer and walking into our living room and saying a prayer that I would find the right words. He looked at me and said "why are you praying for yourself, your patient is the one with cancer!" Thank you, Raul, for all the many years of support, even when what I wanted to do sounded crazy...I wouldn't be here without all of you but especially you!

I was asked to re-apply to medical school after taking a leave to have a baby and was interviewed by someone who said "why are you here? You should leave this spot to someone who is truly dedicated to medicine." After drying my eyes and my blouse because I was nursing and doing my second interview, I realized then and there that being a mother in med school made me different.

My own mother's words rang in my mind, "you will always be different (she was referring to my ethnicity), and that difference can be your advantage or your disadvantage...it's up to you". Three years later during my induction to AOA, when I was pregnant with my second son, the same person said to me "oh I always knew you'd do well."

As a family physician I have had the privilege to practice full scope family medicine in an academic setting, serve farmworkers in South Georgia, serve children in an orphanage in the Dominican Republic, and serve as chief medical officer of a QI and UM company. None of which I ever dreamed of doing when I started.

As your president I pledge to work to advance the goals of our academy to serve the patients and families in Georgia and our family medicine colleagues.

COVID has placed a spotlight on some things we already knew: our healthcare system is fragmented and siloed, we have not invested sufficiently in public health and primary care and prevention, and health disparities remain even when some barriers such as access to vaccine and testing are removed.

We have just finished our three year strategic plan and like our parent organization the AAFP, none of our 5 pillars specify goals around diversity equity and inclusion as we expect to weave DEI into everything we do. As we work together to change things at a system level and advance family medicine through education, advocacy and service my call to action is this: I invite you to join me in beginning the culture change toward inclusion.

Mother Theresa says, “not all of us can do great things, but each of us can do small things with great love”. When you go back next week to your practices, hospitals, and communities, look at whose voice is not being heard and invite them to the table. Different perspectives will make us stronger, different perspectives will make us more innovative, different perspectives will allow us to build more effective healthcare teams and ultimately help us