

The Great and Powerful Match

Friday, March 4, 2016: I'll never forget the day I signed my application, saying that I was willing to give away the next year of my life for an opportunity to complete a residency ANYWHERE that would accept me. It was the culmination of the past 4 years: surviving the didactics, sweating my way through 10 months of rotations, applying to multiple programs, interviewing at a few, and managing to keep my sanity. All of my efforts in pharmacy school were now left to this mythical "match process," which in retrospect seems oddly similar to approaching the Wizard of Oz.

I spent the next 2 weeks living in nothing but complete anxiety. Having completed a psych rotation and made it this far (and by far, I mean being on track for graduation) in my pharmacy career, I felt immune to handling this kind of stress. Yet these were lies I told myself. Boldfaced lies. For 2 weeks, I couldn't sleep more than 3 hours a night. Two more weeks and I might have resorted to a couple glasses of wine to try to fall asleep at night. For 14 days, I had no idea what was in store for the rest of my life. All of this while my friends not pursuing a residency were getting job offers like kids in a candy store. ("Would you like some Jolly Ranchers and Junior Mints on top of your chocolate-covered truffles?")

As each day passed, I began to panic more. Was I truly cut out for a residency? Did I botch the interview cases? Why didn't the interviewers like me? Graduation was looming, and I had nothing to show for myself. After 8 years of school, I was 2 months from a degree, but I had absolutely no plans for the rest of my life! (Or at least the rest of my life that immediately followed graduation.) I panicked and started applying for jobs. I reached out to anyone I could about open pharmacist positions. I had all the job applications complete and ready to submit for when the Wizard delivered the news of my impending failure.

As the match approached, each day passed even more slowly. I was a kid with his hand out in the candy store, and it was literally taking 3000 years to get my gummy bears. The final days of rotations and my flurry of job applications were enough to keep my mind busy, but the 3 days leading up to the match were nothing less than torture. I filled them with reading more about the role of *HER2/neu* receptor-targeted therapies in metastatic *HER2(+)* breast cancer than I ever thought possible. As time continued to turn backward, I finished the last of my pharmacy school assignments (EVER!) and put the finishing touches on my job applications with a machine-like efficiency that only pharmacy school could produce.

Wednesday, March 16, 2016: Only 2 days remained in my career as a pharmacy student. Thanks to the cousin who had an upcoming wedding out of the country, I had the last rotation block off. Now, only 2 days stood between me and the great and powerful Oz. Needless to say, I was brain dead and worthless at the final days of rotation. March madness was now the sole reason I had any sanity left. I see what you did there, ASHP ;).

Friday, March 18, 2016 (queue the law and order sound): Judgment Day. All of us had gone out the night before in a fashion that would make the freshman year college students in us proud, yet sleep was still unreachable. Hours of worthless in-and-out sleep followed. The last time I saw the clock on my phone, it was 5:36 in the morning. I was doomed for yet another night of laughable sleep and the all-too-deserved consequences as congratulations for my choices the night before.

The next thing I knew, it was 7:15 a.m.!

What had I done??!?

How could I ACTUALLY fall asleep during the final hours before the decision that determined the path for the rest of my life!?! I panicked, as if I was going to be late on my very last day of rotation. I found my phone, and there it was: an e-mail from the National Matching Services! If at all possible, I panicked even more and maybe let out a screech like some teenage girl who just met her celebrity crush. My phone “flew” across the room as I opted to jump out of bed and get ready for my last day of rotation.

Just before leaving for rotation, I gathered courage, took a deep breath, and opened the e-mail with what seemed to be the slowest swipe right of all time.... Congratulations, you have been matched to: YOUR DREAM PROGRAM! I quickly closed the phone and opened the e-mail once again. It read the same.... My face went numb ... I couldn't believe what my eyes were reading—was this real life? Or was this a dream playing with my newly fragile and sleep-deprived emotional self? A third check: it was very real. As serious and real as Morgan Freeman's voice at the beginning of a movie. I was in complete shock—so overwhelmed with joy that I couldn't formulate words. I merely jumped up and down as if I were Rocky at the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art mixed with a Super Bowl Shuffle of sorts. I imagine this is what Michael felt like after making “The Shot” to beat Cleveland at the buzzer.

I was able to compose myself enough to call home and share the news with my family. My dad's awareness of how hard I had worked for this moment resulted in an embarrassingly hysterical flow of emotions. I didn't care. I was on cloud nine, and I floated to my car feeling 800 pounds lighter.

Fast-forward to the present day: The conclusion of rotations, commencement, and bittersweet celebrations and good-byes has come and gone. I have packed my life into the car and headed east, to the Emerald City. I am eager to begin this next chapter as a pharmacy resident, which seemed such a distant goal during the past 4 years. I have come prepared with my freshly printed Pharm.D. degree and a hunger to learn in an accelerated course of study. Orientation begins, just as the first day of school began in years past, and I ease into the flurry of deadlines and responsibilities, yet this is far more intriguing and involved. It seems manageable, yet slightly nauseating, as I feel the responsibility of approving my first prescription order. However, I stand firm with an equally riveting determination that I will not throw away my shot. I am home, and there is no place like home!

About the author: Alex Rogers is a PGY1 pharmacy practice resident at the Medical University of South Carolina, a Broadway enthusiast, and a Chicago sports superfan (Go Cubs Go!).