I would like to first give thanks to Dr. Michael McNitt-Gray, the chair of the Physics and Biology in Medicine program here who recommended me for this speaking role. He is a friend and fierce advocate who was there for me when I was just a grad student. Dr. McNitt-Gray represents a history of excellence in a department here which helped give the world PET imaging thanks to luminaries like Drs. Ed Hoffman and HK Huang and Nobel Prize winning Dr. Michael Phelps. I want to thank all of the distinguished faculty, guests, graduates, deans, organizers and other university leadership present. Finally, I would like to give special recognition to Paris McDonald who organized my travel and logistics.

For these next 10 minutes together, my aim is to give you a masterclass on agency and owning your narrative.

And although we have just met, I need to tell you the truth.
I almost didn’t make it here. To this very stage, roughly 15 years ago. I almost didn’t make it. I almost did not graduate with my PhD. Yet, I stand before you today as one of the happiest medical physicists you will ever meet and in full possession of my PhD from this very institution. I also come bearing 2 important life lessons that will help you leave here the way I wish I had on my graduation day—Empowered, happy, whole and free!

Let me explain.

According to an article, “PhD Attrition: How Much is Too Much?” in the Chronicle of Higher Education, nearly 50% of doctoral graduate students nationwide do not complete their degree. You are survivors. And my goal is to help you see yourself as thrivers before I leave today.

Before I ever touched this campus, I knew that I was the daughter of a retired Lt Colonel in the US Army. Both of my parents were educators and first-generation college students. My dad’s father was a sharecropper and my mom’s mom was a washer woman. My parents were children of the Civil Rights Era. My dad marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr when he came to Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU). My parents used education as the means to leave their humble roots. They were heroes and proof that, yes I can do it, no matter what it is!
When I got to my first Physics class in high school, I was firmly a nerd and top pick for valedictorian. However, I encountered my first major roadblock in my academic career.

Lesson #1: How you view yourself matters most.

On the first day of my high school Physics class in Miami, FL, my teacher walked into my classroom, saw the kids in the room, sighed and said “why should I even waste my time?” And then placed her book on the lectern and walked out.

I didn’t even have time to process the intentions behind her words, let alone get offended. I took my precocious self straight on down to the principal’s office and reported that we needed a substitute since our teacher had left.

Then I looked around and tried to see what she had seen. I saw friends, I saw the smartest kids in the school all trying to learn honors level Physics before we could get accepted into the Advanced Placement Physics class in the fall. I also saw happy Black, Brown, tan kids all looking like Miami and the Caribbean.

It’s funny but as I get older, what I remember most about my first time seeing my Physics teacher was how shocked and proud I was to see that she was a woman. And I surmised before she ever uttered her comment that if she could get a degree to teach Physics then I sure as heck could too!

How you view yourself is paramount! Don’t waste time looking for the offense.

Lesson #2: Purpose triumphs over pain

During my summer research experience at UPenn, I got the phone call that changed my life.

“Dude, you’re in trouble, your mom is on the phone.”

Before I could speak, the phone said “Call mom.”

Message sent, the person abruptly hung up. That had not been my mom.
I told my roommate that she had just spoken with my soldier sister and called my mom back home in Miami.

My mom told me that she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer.

I joined her on her first day of radiation therapy treatment and met her medical physicist who explained how I could use my physics degree to join him saving lives. I felt like a soldier with fresh orders and direction.

With my purpose firmly established, I came to UCLA's Biomedical Physics department not caring if I was the first Black woman to attempt this degree here, I needed to get degreed to save lives and help my mom while I could.

So as I began year 5 of grad school here, one day I gave my advisor the results of my recent experiments, he casually looked them over and said that what I had done simply wasn’t enough for me to graduate on time.

He wanted to expand the scope of the project and he wanted more papers from me. I was dumbfounded and stared at him in silence and quiet rage.

Then he just came out and said it, “Julie, you’re not gonna graduate til next year.”

I broke. I had plans, I wanted to get back home to Miami asap, get certified and save lives.

So, I had a choice to make that night as I sat in my apartment feeling like my world had caved in. I got advice from Dr. McNitt-Gray. But, I knew my pride and ego were pushing me to consider options that could make my future less in alignment with who I was.

So I remembered why I came, who I am and who I represent. And I worked harder in my last 12 months than I had worked on anything in my life. I did what my mom always said, “keep the main thing the main thing”.

What I did not do was properly forgive my advisor during this process. I simply shutdown emotionally and got the work done.
It took time, distance, counseling and perspective to acknowledge what has held me back with growing my own lab. So I am here today to encourage you to let the hurt go now!

If you address the root of your pain or hurt feelings, guess what I have noticed for myself, restoration, peace, new ideas, collaborations, relationships and more will meet you on the other side. I finally realized that perhaps my advisor's intent with his comment was not a put-down, but a show of confidence in what he saw me capable of. He asked me to do more because he believed I could!! It was the biggest compliment hidden in a basket full of trash, but a compliment none the less.

I had no idea that my decision to persist, finish my degree and work on my ego would make me capable of the impact I have had on treating thousands of patients at the top cancer center in the world, that I would be building bridges to my field as a spokesperson. I had no idea how much I would love my life once I got past the hurt and leaned into the lesson and forgiveness.

So don't leave here with a chip on your shoulder. Still stinging from the last criticism a committee member offered you. Your future is waiting on you.

My call to action for all of you is simple: Own your Narrative! Address what has held you back and leave here free, unbothered and ready for your next opportunity and challenge. Your emotional, mental and even spiritual wellness are important and your birth right! Do not carry negativity into your beautiful future. This campus has given each of us so much to be grateful for from its reputation, the unparalleled educational resources and even its sheer beauty.

I urge you to remember who you are! You represent the excellence that is UCLA. You are gifted, talented, valuable, intelligent, empowered, a Bruin and the incomparable UCLA doctoral class of 2024!