Resident Personal Statement – Career Goals

Before I ever looked through a slit lamp, I spent my life looking at sheet music. I trained as a classical cellist and planned a career in performance. When I changed course toward medicine, I did so because I wanted that same sense of impact but directed toward people's quality of life. Microsurgery felt like a natural extension of my musical background, demanding disciplined practice and the ability to perform under pressure for an "audience" of one patient at a time.

My first exposure to ophthalmology came in research, when Dr. Sandra Montezuma took a chance on a former musician trying to figure out who he would become after music. She invited me to create an inherited retinal disease (IRD) registry at the University of Minnesota. Sitting with patients affected by IRD, listening to stories of vision loss, and seeing how multiple generations could be linked by a single gene fundamentally changed how I thought about blindness. Treatment options were limited, and severe vision loss often felt inevitable, yet these patients kept showing up, hoping that careful imaging and genetic testing might open a therapeutic door that had always been shut to their relatives.

Through this work, I found a new kind of community. Our IRD research group and the local Fighting Blindness support community taught me what it means to stand alongside patients in a collective effort against an incurable cause of blindness. Hearing patients describe how a diagnosis reverberated through their extended families made me realize that we were not just treating individuals; we were fighting for the futures of children and grandchildren who might one day benefit from therapies that do not yet exist. The idea that careful phenotyping and trial readiness could help deliver a specific therapy to a highly specific disease resonated with me and became the foundation of my commitment to an academic career in retina.

Since then, I have built an academic path in retina around that same impulse. I am now an ophthalmology resident and chief resident at the University of Minnesota, pursuing a career as an academic vitreoretinal surgeon and clinician-scientist. My work has ranged from IRD genetics and imaging to NEI-sponsored clinical trials, ocular trauma outcomes, anti-VEGF therapies, and vitreoretinal surgical technique. I have led projects that resulted in first-author publications in retina and vision science journals and am helping to launch a program in sustainable vitreoretinal surgery through gas tamponade dynamics studies and forthcoming prospective trials. These experiences have prepared me to design and lead multicenter studies that bridge detailed phenotyping, rigorous trial methodology, and real-world practice.

Leadership and education are central to the career I hope to build. As chief resident and a recipient of multiple research and foundation grants, I have tried to create initiatives that will outlast my time in training and to model a service-oriented approach for junior learners, including founding the Sight Worth Saving eyeglass recycling program. Ultimately, I hope to direct a retina service in an academic center, lead a portfolio of clinical trials in inherited and acquired retinal disease, and mentor trainees in ophthalmology. The Heed Resident Retreat will provide targeted mentorship, a community of peers focused on academic careers, and practical guidance on building a clinician-scientist pathway in vitreoretinal surgery at a pivotal moment as I transition to fellowship and begin planning early-career grant applications and collaborative research programs.