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Journalism

The Doctor Will See You Now

I stood at the glass window, mesmerized and mildly horrified. In front of us, a surgical team with impeccably starched light blue scrubs held a man's life in their latex covered hands. Though their faces were obstructed by surgical masks, scrub caps, and other students clamoring to get as close as they possibly could to the glass, their intense and singular focus to save the patient's life was evident. It was almost performative, so effortless and dynamic their teamwork and skills seemed to us. Their calmness seemed to transfer from the operating table to the observation dome, where slightly squeamish, but entirely entranced future health professionals witnessed a modern marvel. We were scheduled to observe a double bypass heart surgery that morning and, although we had seen video simulations of this procedure before, this was not an instructional demonstration to teach budding minds about the different parts of the heart: this was someone's life on the line.

Mildly horrified morphed into complete panic. How were they so calm? One wrong slice and someone could die. I looked down at my own royal blue scrubs, trying to disguise the very small but very distinct dark mark on my scrub pocket. Around 10 the previous night, the guys who roomed next to us discovered that they had no idea how to iron. Instead of preparing for the obviously busy day ahead of us, my roommates and I ended up ironing 8 pairs of scrubs.

Word had gotten out around on the trip's Facebook group chat and someone showed up with graham crackers and chocolate to cook s'mores on the iron. Somehow my scrubs ended up stained with the charred remains of an iron s'more gone terribly wrong. No one else would notice that stain, but I hoped someone would, if only to tell me I was not cut out for this.

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People who know me now are surprised to learn that when I was younger, I was certain I wanted to be a doctor. As the child of a doctor, my upbringing was inundated by all things medicine. My brother and I grew up playing with Dad's medical equipment and free branded gifts from pharmaceutical companies. We spent more time in hospitals and doctors' lounges than on the playground whenever he was on call. Most of the doctors in the area knew exactly who I was even though I had no idea who they were. However, it never bothered me at all because I was proud of my dad and where he worked. I felt so special when he would go out of his way to tell everyone that I was his daughter.

On the few occasions that he took the day off, we would go to Sam's Club. We always encountered past and current patients of his who graciously thanked him for all that he done for them. The level of respect he received from his patients, their families, and other physicians was something I always admired. He would tell me, "This could be you one day."

Though he never explicitly told me that he wanted me to become a doctor, I was slowly being groomed into becoming the next Dr. Bradley. It was expected that at least one child would take over the family business. Although I was naturally drawn toward the art of writing from an early age, I had to face the fact that it would remain only a hobby as I was told I could never support myself or be respected if I was not successful. It was not just my dad's dream anymore; it had become my own. Failure was not an option I felt like entertaining.

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Doc Prep was the pinnacle of the Med High academic experience. South Texas High for Health Professions, or Med High for short, was in Mercedes, a forty-five-minute bus ride from where I lived. A small magnet school that prided itself on being nationally ranked for its academic achievements and health science based curriculum, being admitted to Med High meant

I have acted with honesty and integrity in producing this work and am unaware of anyone who has not. –Devon Bradley

you were one of the lucky few that would be well prepared to go out into the real world and make a difference. With no sports and little room for electives that did not revolve around health science, I willingly sacrificed a normal high school experience so I could pursue my passion.

From day one of freshman year, our teachers prepared us to one day go out into the world, equipped with basic skills and knowledge, to take care of others. For many students, their education was the stepping stone to their future as healthcare professionals. The previous summer, students who were ranked in the top ten percent of our class spent 5 days touring MD Anderson and various research centers on the Gulf Coast. Students who managed to maintain their rankings were invited the summer before their senior year. I had heard about how “life-changing” the event was from previous students who were happily enrolled in various pre-medicine programs. From seeing a live surgery to being well prepared for the college application process, this program was everything I had envisioned. It was going to be the place where I would have that moment that most doctors experience, where everything becomes crystal clear, the place where you say to yourself, *“This is exactly what I want to be doing.”*

I remember receiving a white envelope with my name on it during my Spanish class. It was the season of standardized testing at Med High, which meant displaced classrooms, late lunches, an incredible amount of busy work, and incredibly competitive high stakes card games. High stakes at the time was bragging rights, which goes a long way in an extremely competitive high school, where competition was as natural and essential as breathing. The day’s pseudo-classroom was the smaller of the two biology labs, which we shared with a freshman biology class and another Spanish class.

Alice, the messenger from Central Office, walked into the chaotic biology lab that had become our classroom for the past week. Usually, she would visit to chat with teachers and students as well as deliver important administrative messages, making us smile even though high school was most certainly not something to smile about. In her hand, she held three crisp envelopes with the official district stamp, with names neatly scrawled on the back.

“I’m looking for Ena, Jomari, and Devon.”

My instinctual reaction was to freeze. I was so engrossed in holding together the tower Ena, Jomari and I had constructed using our cellphones that I had hardly noticed that everyone was staring at our table. I averted my gaze to the surface of the blacktop lab table, littered with pencil markings of bored students of past and present as well as a diagram of the Krebs cycle.

“Devon, Jomari, and Ena. Raise your hands. I can’t see you.” Profesora called over the rising collective volume of the three classes.

Raising our hands, I looked over at my friends to see if they knew what was going on. I held my breath, going with my gut instinct that this envelope held gravely bad news. If it was bad news, I should get done and over with it quick, just like removing a Band-Aid. However, once I opened it, it was not at all what I had expected:

“Congratulations. Based on your outstanding academic performance, you have been invited to attend Doc Prep, an annual enrichment program held at Baylor College of Medicine where a select group of South Texas high school students are introduced to the practices of the medical field and medical school application process. Please stop by Room 102 sometime in the next week to notify the sponsors of your preferred size for scrubs.”

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After a four-hour bus trip filled with game after game of Slapjack, we finally arrived in Houston. Fifteen minutes after we had checked into our hotel, all in a line, we crossed the few

blocks distance to Baylor College of Medicine. Each participant was given a white binder that contained everything they would need to know for the duration of the trip along with a name tag. One of the program coordinators thought it would be a good idea to have everyone introduce themselves by providing their name, high school, and preferred specialty in medicine.

Shakily, I raised my hand to awkwardly wave at the kids who I would be with over the next week. “My name is Devon. I’m from Med High and I’m interested in studying pediatrics or oncology.” *I think?*

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Part of the enrichment program included a daily Communications class taught by current graduate students from Rice University. I skimmed through the white binder that would become my Bible over the next week and saw a syllabus, stating the scheduled readings and assignments for the course. Basically, we would be writing a draft of the college application essays we would submit in a few short months. This would be a cinch. I enjoyed writing.

“I want you to write about anything that has had a significant impact on you and describe it with as much detail as you can.”

The class was told that writing and medicine, two seemingly unrelated callings, required similar skills sets and stemmed from the same intent. Writing illuminated the human condition while medicine ministered to it.

I wrote my rough draft about the year my family found out my mother had been diagnosed with cancer. I felt proud of my work and marveled at how easily the story came to me. However, I would leave storytelling to the storytellers. As much as I enjoyed telling stories, I knew it could never be more than a hobby. It felt wrong to have dedicated my life to pursuing something I thought I loved only to change my mind and go against what I had been prepared for all my life. I pushed that dream to the back of my mind and focused on the only dream I thought mattered.

We filed into the lecture hall immediately following Communications class where a panel of current medical students sat, prepared to answer any questions about the application process. Someone raised their hand to ask how competitive different programs around the state were.

The medical student replied, “Applying to medical school is a competitive process. Some of you may apply to an accelerated program where you finish in three years while some of you may opt to the more traditional four-year education. From my experience, the best advice I can give to you guys is know what you want. Medical school admissions do not want to give a spot and admit someone who will change their mind. So keep up your grades in college and gain as much experience and observation as you can and I think you’ll be good.”

I immediately lifted my head and stopped doodling on the edge of my notebook. Where did that come from? I felt as if that statement was pointed at me: “someone who will change their mind.” Why did it affect me? I had no intention of changing my mind, but the absolute finality in the medical student’s statement struck a chord with me.

When our group walked into the lecture hall, there was an overwhelming smell of pickling vinegar.

“I heard about this,” I overheard from someone from a different group say to their friend as we found our seats. “They said they couldn’t get actual cadavers this year so they got the next best thing: pigs.”

The activity was a hands-on experience with gross anatomy and introduction to basic surgical techniques. Instead of a human cadaver, which I silently thanked God, there were lab trays with pigs' feet. The thought of working on a human cadaver made me sick to my stomach.

"Today, you are going to learn how to perform a basic suture."

I tried to recall different instances where I had seen different physicians stitch wounds back together. Images of Dr. Frankenstein and various doctors from medical dramas came to mind. *This will be easy.*

No amount of research could cover up the fact that I had no idea what I was doing, although directions were being dictated to us and med students were floating around to help.

"Palm the needle driver. Make sure grab the needle in the middle and listen for the click. The click means you have a firm grasp."

I grabbed the needle driver and it promptly clattered to the ground. *Well shit.*

"Make sure you don't pull too hard or else the tissue will bend. Remember, your job is to not further injure the patient"

Sure enough, I looked down and my double knot had done exactly what it was not supposed to do. If this foot was attached to its original owner, it would probably be squealing, trying to get away from this poor display of surgical precision. *As a med student, you'll have plenty of time to practice.* Practice makes perfect but the thought of doing this again made me nauseous. *Focus, Devon. You need to focus. What if this was a person? What would Dad think?* Would he be cracking jokes with his partner or creating imaginary scenarios like I so wanted to or would he be calm, collected, and focused at the job at hand?

Looking around, my peers evidently picked up the skill quite quickly and were nearly done sewing the gashes in front of them with precision and little anxiety. Some even finished and gestured to their sponsors to show them their handiwork. I had not caught on. To add insult to injury, it took two current medical students and a chaperone to undo my suture that evidently stayed on one side of the incision. Instead of stitching together the wound, I ended up creating a new wound all together.

"Is everyone done? If everyone is finished, please place your tools back in your trays. Before we leave, I would like to pass something around that I think you all will enjoy."

Out of a small cooler, the lecturer lifted a small, gray object that resembled a dehydrated melon.

"This is a human brain, cut at the corpus callosum to show the two hemispheres of the brain."

As the specimen was passed up and down the aisles, I was shocked to realize I was not as excited as everyone else seemed to be. This gray, squishy mass used to be alive, connected to a person and producing every thought, emotion, sensation they ever had. As much as I wanted to be impressed by how well it was preserved, I could not shake the absolute feeling of certainty that this was exactly the last thing I wanted to do, holding someone's life in my hands. For the duration of the trip, I proceeded with a clear conscience that at least I knew for sure, I did not intend to be anywhere near the medical field.

That night, I felt like a failure. I could not come up with a logical reason why I had changed my mind. Once the group walked back to our hotel, I called my dad in tears.

"I can't do this anymore. I think- I know I don't want to be a doctor anymore. I'm so sorry," I told him.

Instead of comforting me, he regurgitated the same speech I had heard so many times as a child about his journey to becoming a doctor.

“Dad, that’s not helpful at all. If anything, it only makes me feel worse”

After a moment of silence, he replied, “I only want you to do what makes you happy.”

“Do you still want me to become a doctor?” I asked, already knowing what his answer would be.

“Yes. That would make me very happy.”

“I don’t think I can do that anymore,” I responded with confidence.

“I think you will end up changing your mind in the end. You’re still young. Don’t think about it too much,” my dad said before ending the call.

His answer dissipated any remaining doubt I had in my mind. It was time for me to develop my own dream.

Author’s Note

The reporting process for this narrative required to reflect back on something I pushed out of my mind entirely. It was not until I was tagged in a photo on Facebook that happened to be from the Doc Prep trip. I had not thought much about my experiences before my senior year of high school because I was still confused about what I wanted to do. Previously, I had used an abridged version of this story for my application essay to Southwestern, but consciously censored the very last section because I was still working through it. I was still angry because even to this day, my family still expects that I will follow in my dad’s footsteps and take over his practice.

Drawing upon my memories of Doc Prep and working through it as a narrative served as a long overdue catharsis for me. It was and still is a very emotional experience in my life. By speaking with my friends who were on the trip with me and my parents about what they remember me telling them, I was able to remember distinctly the positive and negative aspects of the trip. I now remember the one time where I was in an elevator with some of my classmates and someone had mistaken our group as medical students. My friend Ashley further corrected the man saying we were already doing our residency. The trip was not altogether heartbreaking but it was no trip to Disneyworld either.

Without a doubt, writing this personal narrative was the most difficult work in the class for me. Yet, “The Doctor Will See You Now” is the article I chose that best represents my work in the class because I felt it was the most authentic. This course helped me grow tremendously as a writer as I gained experience with different types of nonfiction narratives. My work in profiling other people felt more natural to me as it is what I am used to writing, although telling in a narrative format was challenging. Instead of maintaining some distance as a writer in order to paint a narrative portrait of someone else, I had to let myself tell my own story which is easier said than done.