

“Alone we can do a little; together we can do so much.” Helen Keller

Growing up it was just my mom and me. She worked hard to provide for us, but our culture and her limited skill set made it difficult for her to do. We relied on our community for essentials such as food, my education, and my childcare. Our community was determined to help, and they helped us survive. As I grew older and my understanding of our situation became clear, I valued their hard work and collective efforts. These values form the foundation of my desire to become a doctor, and many of my experiences have developed this desire into a passion.

In high school I became fascinated with how systems in the body work together to create functional human beings. My interest led to my first research experiences. I learned how to use the scientific method and to think critically while investigating topics such as whether sensitivity is affected by a person’s dominant side and how heart rate changes with exercise. Designing and carrying out experiments, along with analyzing the results, was exciting to me – I was turning questions into answers and strengthening my understanding of the human body. Even when experimental results opposed my expectations, I was intrigued, wanting to know why and learn more. I became open-minded and patient with the process, and learned to think about the “big picture.”

Following graduation, I immigrated to the U.S. and found life here was not easy either. Seeking financial security and to become part of a community again, I enlisted in the military reserves. With this footing in place, I entered college thinking about becoming a doctor.

I continued my pursuit with new research opportunities such as studying the genetic basis of cardiovascular disease, and my enthusiasm flourished. Seeing how research can lead to innovations in healthcare and improve our understanding of disease is inspiring to me. There may not be a cure or life-improving medication, technique, or device today, but there may be tomorrow.

During my sophomore year, I deployed to war in Afghanistan. The experience was traumatizing. The violence I saw taught me how quickly life can be lost. I was afraid every day, but in fear I gained wisdom – to me, life is precious and valuable, not to be wasted, but shared. Focusing on this, I received permission to volunteer at our base medical facility. Being a rare clinical opportunity, I studied how medicine was practiced in a mobile setting, and I was grateful to be given the opportunity to directly engage patients. My responsibilities were basic, but I learned the difference small actions can make: nonverbal cues, speaking in a calming manner, and being willing to help. I also witnessed doctors and care teams provide unbiased, compassionate care to all patients, even enemy combatants. This resonated with my respect for life and desire to become a doctor.

Returning home, I did not realize the long-term impact being in a combat zone would have on me. My transition was easy at first, but after ten months, PTSD symptoms started breaking through – irritability, lethargy, insomnia, inability to concentrate, and feeling isolated. I began having debilitating panic attacks. My friends encouraged me to get help, and I did, but being raised in an environment where people work hard no matter what, it took a while to accept I needed help. My academics, work, and relationships suffered. I felt the destructive forces a long-term illness can have on life, and I empathize with others dealing with life-impacting health problems.

Once I allowed myself to receive the care I needed, I engaged the road to recovery and learned how important access to healthcare is, including patient willingness to seek care. It took a year, but I healed.

With heartfelt appreciation, I respect the efforts of my care team in helping me regain my health and well-being. Feeling better is amazing! For me to be able to help others feel well again, too, is exciting!

Experiencing PTSD and feeling how mental injury can affect physical well-being was eye opening. This insight informs my big picture idea of health, and I feel understanding that mental and physical wellness go hand-in-hand and can feed one another either negatively or positively will help me in my future practice.

Volunteering in the No Vet Dies Alone program showed me my dedication. When I first began, witnessing patients suffering terrible pain was nearly unbearable. Thankfully, being a vet myself and relating to their life experiences strengthened my resolve. The care I am able to provide proved to me their suffering exceeds any discomfort I feel. I am compelled to be with them in their time of need and give them comfort in knowing someone cares enough to stay with them. I want to give them my best. Coming to terms with each person's inevitable death is a sadness that comes with this job, but being there for them – not letting them die alone – is what is important. It drives me to keep volunteering in this program.

To me, life is precious. My passion is to join our global community of caregivers and help people live happier, healthier lives by becoming a doctor with an open-minded, determined-to-serve, patient-first willingness who provides compassionate, efficacious, holistic healthcare.