

Neha Deshpande

Harvard Medical School

A Woman of Means

Like many of my classmates, I had feared that going through the process of medical school would turn me from the bright-eyed, bushy-tailed idealist to the jaded fourth year medical student. I worried that interacting firsthand in a busy university hospital would lead to disappointment and cynicism towards the medical system; frustration due to the inability to solve the complex socioeconomic problems of my patients; and ultimately desensitization to human loss and suffering. This was my utmost fear. However, early on in medical school, I met Dr. Roseanna Means, an internist at Brigham & Women's Hospital (BWH), and by far my most inspirational role model and mentor in medicine.

Dr. Means represents the unique echelon of the physicians who have taken on a "sky is the limit" view of their responsibilities towards their patients and community. Rather than becoming jaded by the shortcomings of the medical system or developing cynicism to modern health care service and delivery, Dr. Means capitalized on the opportunity to solve a critical problem in our community: homelessness in women and children. Dr. Means possesses not only the qualities of a caring and compassionate mentor, but also those of a dynamic entrepreneur, empathetic physician, selfless volunteer, and engaging teacher. She is a remarkable clinician who has devoted her career to improving the health and lives of poor and marginalized women. With her care, she communicates to her patients that the medical profession has not forsaken them. She also reminds her fellow physicians and students of our duty to care for our

most vulnerable populations and provides a tangible example of how to do so.

Having completed both her medical school and residency training in Boston, Dr. Means became exposed to many struggles facing the disenfranchised and underserved women of Boston who were homeless. After several years of working for Boston Healthcare for the Homeless, she noticed that only a small portion (<10%) of the city's homeless women sought medical care, which she suspected was from a combination of stigma, fear of violence, logistics of childcare, and pressures of life on the streets. What I most admire about Dr. Means is that she recognized a problem in her own backyard, and used her medical expertise and humanitarian spirit to work tirelessly to find, design, and implement a solution. In 1999, while balancing a full-time career as a BWH primary care doctor, she founded a non-profit organization called Woman of Means as a way to address the socioeconomic and healthcare challenges facing women who are experiencing homelessness.

Since its inception in 1999, Woman of Means has completed more than 100,000 clinical encounters for women and children who are homeless (~10,000 visits per year and 2,500 new patients annually). The program currently serves more than 90% of the city's women who are homeless and is able to provide them with services that would otherwise be difficult or even impossible for them to access or pay for. These services are largely focused on preventative care and chronic disease manage-

ment. Currently, Woman of Means has 16 regular volunteer physicians from a wide variety of medical specialties as well as 9 nurse case managers. The organization provides free care to 7 shelters for women and 5 family shelters, including domestic violence shelters.

Parallel to her community service work, Dr. Means has been an important mentor and teacher for many students and resident doctors. Woman of Means has been offering clinical elective for Harvard medicals school students and residents across all Boston teaching hospitals to gain exposure to community medicine and underserved patient populations. Students and interact directly with patients in the shelters and learn more about the problems facing homeless women. Her elective is an opportunity for trainees to work with underserved populations and understand socioeconomic factors associated with care and other sensitive topics such as unstable living situations, abuse, poor nutrition, physical and mental illness, and more. In addition, Woman of Means also offers a clinical volunteerism elective for both international students and those from other U.S. states, serves as a host site for two different nursing programs in Boston, and training site for graduate students in the fields of social work, mental health, and interpreter services.

I have come to know Dr. Means on both a professional and personal basis. She is a true humanitarian. She is supportive, caring, admirable, and accessible to both her patients and her student mentees. She is always available to listen, offer guidance, provide insight, and educate. What I find most commendable is her extreme humility and pleasant demeanor. She once said to me, “I never refer to a patient as a homeless woman but rather a woman who is experiencing homelessness. Homelessness

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is a situation, not something that defines a person.” Working with her over the course of medical school has given me insight into the fragmented nature of care that homeless women receive and the challenges of providing care to this unique population. Among her many accolades, most notable include:

2010 CNN Hero award, 2011 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Community Health Leader award, 2014 Harvard medical school nomination for the Arnold P. Gold Foundation Humanism in Medicine Award.

As a future obstetrician-gynecologist and advocate of women’s health, I aspire to be even half as good of a physician, leader, and human being as Dr. Means. I have tremendous respect and admiration for her as a person, and for the tremendous service work that she has done in women’s health and community medicine. She reminds students like me of the reason why I sought out my medical degree in the first place – the humanism, compassion, and empathy that marks the foundation of the medical profession. She truly embodies mission of the American Medical Women’s Association and represents one of few female leaders in medicine who has devoted their career to helping, healing, and caring for other women. There is no doubt in my mind that she embodies the true vision and spirit of the Linda Brodsky MD essay award.