

Grace Sun

Alpert Medical School

Breaking Glass Ceilings, Fixing Bones

Like a palm tree that unfurls its leaves toward the sun, I have grown in my direction towards medicine. I recognize that this was by no means a solo-journey. And like the sun that pulls the palm tree skyward, the female mentors in my life have been a constant force of inspiration and guidance. One physician mentor appeared early on when I was a Junior in high school. She is Dr. Lisa Lattanza, an orthopedic surgeon and chief of the Division of Hand, Elbow, and Upper Extremity Surgery at University of California at San Francisco.

A glance at the demographics for these fields in America reveals a shocking lack of representation of women. In orthopedic surgery, women represent nowhere near 50% of the workforce, rather only a measly 13%. Seeing this statistic prompts the question, why so few women? A crisp, defined answer may not exist because we must consider the multidimensional complexity of the situation that places a strong emphasis on the impact from societal expectations. It is not that women lack the skill for practicing surgery. This is apparent from the 43% of general surgeons who are women. Rather, even in this modern day and age, subtle forces stand against women who have an interest in orthopedic surgery.

Yet, despite these odds, Dr. Lattanza co-founded The Perry Initiative in 2009 as a launch pad for bringing young women into the fields of orthopedic surgery and engineering. The guidance and affirmation from a mentor first instills the self-esteem to pursue the goals we have on our horizons, and then paves the path such that we may come across less friction on our journey.

I was accepted for the 2010 summer program. Dr. Lattanza firmly believes in direct experience, and so arrived the league of us young female students excited for the chance to get our hands “dirty”. The program was divided into two overarching areas, hand surgery and engineering. We strapped on our latex-free gloves and surgeon’s masks, and stuck our hands into our first “patient,” an entire pig. With a group of other eager young women and a practicing surgeon mentor, we slowly dissected the pig for all its anatomical glory, with no organ left behind. I still remember pulling out the intestines and holding the gooey, soft warm object in my hand. To continue, The Perry Initiative program exposed us to multiple aspects of hand surgery, from practicing suturing to an up-and-close demonstration of dissecting a hand cadaver. For those of us who find satisfaction in rallying the process of problem-solving thinking and employing the skill of our hands to fix “broken” objects, the

“...even in this modern day and age, subtle forces stand against women who have an interest in orthopedic surgery.”

engineering portion did not disappoint. With electric saws, the exact same ones used in real surgeries, placed in our hands, we drilled through fractured model bones and rearranged the pieces with screws and bolts, following the guidelines of true techniques. All sorts of bones in the body were practiced upon, from femurs to knee ligaments to spinal vertebrae.

My involvement did not end at the certificate ceremony. Because of the impact this experience left on my affinity towards medicine, I volunteered for the program during the following school years and summers. I became a young mentor who received training, tested modules, and lead workshops for the next generation of participants. Furthermore, I helped expand the program's image for future donors by transcribing video interviews for the website and attending donor events.

Dr. Lattanza welcomed me to shadow her in clinical rounds and the operation room when I was in high school and college. She treats her patients with respect and also approaches each operation, no matter how big or small, with the same attention to detail and carefully pre-planned method. Standing for long hours in her operation room would have been tense if not for her easy-going character. I remember that despite the serious situation – a patient with a disfigured elbow that could no longer extend fully, Dr. Lattanza actively maintained an easy ambiance. She chatted humorously with other attending physicians and medical assistants while asking for feel-good music from the 1940's era to commence in the background. I observed a woman physician who is not only a master of her craft, but also a human being with genuine compassion. As a renowned surgeon, Dr. Lattanza is also a down-to-earth person who offered to drive me, then still a Junior, home after a long day of performing operations.

The Perry Initiative program was initially founded to benefit the high school students at San Francisco location. Under the careful guidance and

far-reaching vision of Dr. Lattanza, now these workshop events are held all across the nation, with new partnerships achieved every year. Today more young women all over the country have the special opportunity to explore the motions of being an orthopedic surgeon through direct hands-on learning. Not only do they have the chance to practice the technique behind repairing bones, but also walk away empowered by the affirming experience. Furthermore, the program has also expanded to encourage female college and medical school students to pursue careers in orthopedic surgery. Contrary to what statistics in history boasts or what the male-dominant socialized thought pushes upon women, The Perry Initiative eradicates the veil to reveal that women possess what it takes to become successful orthopedic surgeons: intelligence, problem-solving thinking, skilled-hands, and stamina. Thanks to Dr. Lattanza, more and more young women who aspire to become doctors gain the empowering confidence to pursue their dreams, despite the odds.

Shadowing and working under Dr. Lattanza has built a solid foundation and standard for the type of physician I aspire to become: a compassionate doctor with a broad vision, a flexible, fast-thinking physician in the clinic, and a warm person to everyone around her. Her inspiration made a huge impact on my career decision. I was accepted by Brown PLME (8-year combined baccalaureate-MD program). Now I am about to finish senior year and move on to medical school.