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I wouldn't be in medical school if I had not met Dr. Lauren Schwartz four years ago. She was the first person to look me in the eyes and say, "You can do this. You can do this. Go for it."

In 2009, I had just graduated from Harvard with a degree in Biology, a passion for playing the piano, and a lost soul. At Harvard, I was told to narrow my career interests; I was told by physician after physician that I'd have to give up the piano if I went into medicine. The idea of medicine was so exciting to me, but I couldn't fathom forfeiting my music.

I graduated confused and in limbo. I won a fellowship to work at a health-care nonprofit in midtown Manhattan by day, counseling elderly and disabled beneficiaries over the phone. By night, I hit the town, handing out my resume, cold-calling playbill.com posters, and playing as much as I could. My evening music career was blossoming, but I felt unfulfilled throughout the day, and found myself daydreaming of a life in medicine.

The turning point came when I was called at the very last minute to play for a charity event entitled "Broadway in South Africa" hosted by neurosurgeon Dr. Lauren Schwartz. Their original pianist was ill, and the concert was beginning in a half hour. I ran to Times Square, grabbed the sheet music and an iPod, and mentally prepared myself. This time, however, it wasn't the performance that held my attention – it was Dr. Schwartz. She was giving a speech about her work as a neurosurgeon and the healing power of music. A neurosurgeon who manages to balance her love of medicine and music? I timidly approached her after the concert, and to my surprise, she warmly invited

me to shadow her; coincidentally, her dream was to play the piano, and I agreed to teach her.

I rounded with Dr. Schwartz, meeting her patients – a young victim of a gunshot wound to the head, a construction worker who fell from scaffolding and broke his neck, a man with herpes in his eye that spread to his brain. I watched her skillfully maneuver their bodies and examine the sites where she had performed surgery earlier. I listened to her speak Spanish to one patient. I stood against the wall as she told one family that their young son did not have much time left. I admired the grace and warmth that flowed so easily from her, touching each family. I shadowed her again, and began to realize that this...this was IT.

One of Dr. Schwartz's most inspiring qualities is her ability to be candid. Over dinner one evening after a day in the OR, I was telling her about my fears, and she put down her utensils, grabbed my hand, and said, "Jessica – you want to be a physician? Do it. You can keep your music. You can do both. I believe in you." I went home and immediately signed up for a post-baccalaureate program. I worked tirelessly in my pre-medical classes and full-time job, commuting between Boston and New York to maintain my music career. Two years later, I received a call from Dean Nicholas of Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons: "Would you like to come to our medical school?" I cried. I cried right into Dean Nicholas' ear and then I danced so ecstatically that I accidentally knocked my father's iPad off the couch and into the dog's water bowl.

I'm now a first year medical student at Columbia. I play on Broadway for Tony Award-winner

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Alice Ripley multiple times every month. I am the President of our monthly student Coffeeshouses and our drama club, The Bard Hall Players. I lead P&S for the Arts and brought 70 physicians and students to see "Wicked" on Broadway last semester. I was just elected to be the student representative to the entire university's arts initiative. I play for rehabilitation patients through ArtReach. I'm on the leadership boards for the Association of Women Surgeons and the American Medical Student Association. I am excited, fascinated, and energetic every single day. I am a musician and I am on my way to being a physician. All of my dreams have come true. I would not be here without Dr. Lauren Schwartz, and I cannot wait to look a young woman in the eyes someday and give her the confidence to join the next generation of aspiring physicians.

