

## SET BACKS & SECOND CHANCES

“Failure is not an option.”

This is a famous paraphrased quote ascribed to a flight controller on the Apollo 13 mission. What may not have been an option for that rocket scientist, is most certainly an option realized in everyone’s life at one time or another. If failure is so universal, why don’t we hear more about this most basic of human experiences? Medicine is one of the most competitive professions in the American labor landscape. Most of us would not have made it into, or out of medical school and residency if failure had been a common professional experience. But eventually, failure—and its experiential cousins, rejection and denial—will touch all our lives in some way. No one is immune—not the chair of a department, CEO of a health system, or president of a medical society. If we all recognized how common failure is, and how healthy it can be for a life well-lived, perhaps we wouldn’t be so fearful or stigmatized by it. Here is one story.

### BONES AND BLOOD

As the end of second year of residency neared, I’d settled on pursuing a cornea fellowship—not so much a reflection of overwhelming anterior segment enthusiasm but more a visceral avoidance of retina, glaucoma and peds, three rotations that had failed to ignite any passion at that point in my residency.

My third year began with the plastics rotation. Yes, my program did not introduce residents to this discipline until 3<sup>rd</sup> year. When I saw the bones, the blood, the saws, hammers and screws, it hit me—I was actually an orthopedic surgeon in an ophthalmologist’s body. I pulled out of the cornea match and set about pursuing my new dream of oculoplastics.

I encountered my first hurdle. Then, as now, the American Society of Oculofacial Plastic Surgery (ASOPRS) match was early, during a resident’s second year. As a third-year resident, I was already a year behind. This wasn’t the deal-breaker one might have thought it would be, however. I had had a baby in the spring of second year; I was beginning my last year of residency as a new mom. Applying late would create a perfectly-timed maternal gap year between residency and fellowship. I couldn’t believe how my newly-hatched plan was falling into place.

I knocked out several fellowship applications before the Holidays. By February of third year I had snagged 7 interviews and started researching flights to visit each program. Oh, and did I mention by this time I was pregnant again? I hit the interview trail seven months pregnant looking smart in a brand-new navy maternity suit.

At one interview, famously conducted along with the fellowship director’s wife, I was peppered with several questions, apparently lifted from the manual of Questions Illegal to Ask in any Job Interview—“You’re pregnant, right?” (No, I just love cake) “Are you planning to have more children?” (No, but neither have I

planned the two I've conceived so far) "What does your husband think about you doing a fellowship?" (I don't know, he thinks I'm visiting my parents right now). The questions are real, the parentheticals were what I wished I had said. I fielded each inappropriate question with diplomacy and restraint.

Except for that interview, no preceptor seemed to make a fuss about my pregnancy. I certainly didn't. I wouldn't be pregnant by the time I started fellowship in a year and a half (I'm not an elephant after all) and like legions of working mothers before me, I too would find suitable childcare arrangements so I could devote the time and energy needed during fellowship. I was not naïve about the challenges but I was committed to obtaining ASOPRS training. I returned from interviews exhausted but nonetheless optimistic about my future.

#### DERAILMENT

When the decision letter came in the mail (email was still years away). I was prepared to be happy wherever I matched though I hoped for one of my top three. I was not prepared for the letter I received. I did not get any of my top three--I didn't get any of my top seven. I had failed to match. Anywhere.

Residents in my program didn't not get fellowships. It was simply not heard of. But in my case, hear about it everyone did. I felt shame, embarrassment but mostly, profound disappointment. I was hurtling toward the culmination of 12 years of training for a career that had just been shockingly derailed. There was little time for self-pity. I had a residency to finish, a second baby to deliver and a cross-country move to make for my husband's job.

Residency ended and all my co-residents went on to fellowships. I had my baby and packed up the moving van headed to Chicago. Not one month out of a high-pressure residency, I was an unemployed mom of two babies in unfamiliar city with no family, no friends, no job prospects and no idea if or when I would work again.

My husband was an investment banker who had to be on his desk downtown for a firm-wide conference call every morning by 6:30 a.m. Four nights a week, when not travelling, he was expected to entertain visiting clients. He was rarely home before 10 pm. I barely saw him during the week, and the kids never did.

It was a lonely and isolating time. I leaned a lot on my parents in Minneapolis for support. My father's reaction was to reassure me that despite he and my mother bankrolling my undergraduate and medical education, I had his blessing if I wanted to walk away from medicine altogether to be a full-time, stay-at-home mom. Touched as I was by this sentiment, I silently recoiled at the notion of giving up all that I had worked for. With due respect to full-time parents, that was not a role I had ever envisioned for myself.

My mother, while equally supportive, was more pragmatic. She counseled me that liberation is all about choices. While family took priority now, I should preserve the ability to work, earn my own money and support myself if I ever needed to.

My one “gap” year turned into two. The kids were thriving while I was slowly dying—professionally. I had poked around at possible part-time comprehensive ophthalmology positions in Chicago but nothing seemed attractive enough to leave my kids for and frankly, my heart just wasn’t in it. I still dreamed of going into plastics.

“WHY NOT?”

One day in late summer of 1993, over a year since finishing residency and between diaper changes and “Barney, the Dinosaur” reruns, I got a call from one of my former co-residents. He had heard there was a new ASOPRS plastics fellowship opening up in Los Angeles. He excitedly told me the preceptor was going to need to select his first fellow outside the match to start that next July. I thanked him for letting me know, quietly hung up the phone and returned to the day’s domestic duties.

Later that day, my mom called. We spoke frequently. She asked about the kids; I asked how her tomatoes were coming in. I casually mentioned that I’d gotten a call about a fellowship opportunity. I could hear the hopefulness in her voice, “Oh??” I continued, “Of course I can’t consider something like that.” There was a long pause. Then my mom said two words that would change my life.

“Why not?”

I reminded her I had two toddlers. And this opportunity was 2000 miles and 2 time zones away. And my husband could never come with me. And did I mention I had two toddlers? She listened to each obstacle I threw out. When I was done, she had concluded the biggest thing holding me back was me. And she told me so, encouraging me to at least talk to my husband about it.

It was a couple days before I worked up the courage to bring it up. I didn’t think my husband would ever support my leaving and taking the kids with me. To my surprise, he was actually relieved on some level. He knew how unhappy I was not working. He himself felt guilt that his new job took so much time away from me and the kids. Leaving for California for two years might be just what our young family needed—a pathway to my own career and a reprieve for my husband’s losing battle with work-life balance.

There would be so many more hurdles to jump if I ever landed this fellowship—( i.e. CHILDCARE)—but I figured the highest hurdles—securing my husband’s blessing and overcoming my own fear —had just been cleared. The next one, however, loomed large. This unemployed, stay-at-home mom had to nail this interview.

I found an old business suit I could still fit in. My parents flew in to keep my kids alive while my husband worked and I headed to the land of palm trees and movie stars for the biggest interview of my life. I spent two days at USC-Doheny Eye Institute with new ASOPRS preceptor Dr. Don Liu. We hit it off and I felt his program would be an exceptionally good fit for me. Despite the bonhomie, Dr. Liu struggled with the literal baggage that came with my candidacy—I'd be moving across the country, away from my husband with two toddlers in tow to begin, after two years out of the workforce altogether, a demanding 2-year fellowship.

At the time, even I admit it all seemed a bit far-fetched to think I had any chance at this opportunity, but my dream was within grasp. There was nothing that would stop me from reaching for it, no matter how far I had to stretch.

#### GOLDEN GIRL

I left LA after those two days, Dr. Liu telling me he would get back to me when he had finished all the interviews. There was nothing to do but wait. A couple weeks later a call came from southern California. It was Don Liu. He didn't offer me the spot but he did want me to sit down with a VIP in ASOPRS leadership. While not having direct clinical contact with his future fellow, Bernice Brown, associate professor at USC and a past-president of ASOPRS, had to approve of Dr. Liu's final selections.

I arranged to meet her on the exhibit floor of the AAO annual meeting that next week in Chicago—how very convenient for me. I had never met her, didn't even know what she looked like (no Google search in 1993). I arrived at the appointed time and place on a busy thoroughfare of the main exhibit hall. I spotted a distinguished-looking woman seated and talking to a young man (was he an interviewee too? I wondered). She stood to say goodbye to him. As she unfolded her long frame, I guessed she was over 6 feet tall. Already nervous, I was now intimidated. She extended a long hand to me and motioned to the chair. "You must be Tamara. Please sit."

Her voice was low and husky. She reminded me of Bea Arthur, the stage and television actress of "Maude" and "The Golden Girls" fame. While not hostile, I would not describe her demeanor as warm in any way. Her smile was formal and somewhat cold. My palms started to feel clammy. Thank goodness I'd already shook her hand.

Dispensing with much of the pleasantries that normally launch a conversation between two strangers, she jumped right into it. "So, I understand you live here in Chicago. And if you took this fellowship, you'd be moving to LA for two years WITH your two small children and WITHOUT your husband?" Her eyes bore holes through my skull. A bead of sweat formed at my temple and I swear, my vision faded momentarily at the periphery.

I thought to myself, when she put it that way, it DID sound ridiculous. Was she right?. Was it reckless to think I could be a fellow and a new mom on my own? I sensed my dream, once again, slipping away; likely, this time, for good. Strangely, this resignation brought me a calm and clarity. Certain this was now a lost cause, I was no longer nervous. I turned to her and replied. “Yes, that’s exactly what I had planned to do. I want it that much.”

She held my gaze for an interminable second, then leaned back in her chair and smiled-- for real this time--with her eyes as well as her mouth. “That’s a girl!” she laughed. My jaw dropped open in confusion. She went on to tell me her improbable journey to becoming one of the most respected women in the very patriarchal, male-dominated field of ophthalmic plastic and reconstructive surgery. She suspended her education when she started a family and went back to medical school as a new mom. She must have recognized a similar, somewhat insane and irreverent fire in me.

#### PROSPECT TO PRESIDENT

Don Liu called me the next week. I would be packing my (diaper) bags and moving to LA. that next July—it was no longer a dream. I would later learn I had edged out a single, 3<sup>rd</sup> year male resident from UC Irvine to land the fellowship. To this day, I send a note of gratitude every few years to Don Liu. He really took a chance on this young black woman--out of the workforce for two years, effectively a single mom to two toddlers—as his first ASOPRS fellow. Almost exactly 25 years after I interviewed for Dr. Liu’s fellowship, I was elected President of ASOPRS. Bernice Brown died a few years ago. I wish I’d told her how her advocacy for me changed the direction of my life.

To this day, every now and again, a particular thorough credentialer will inquire about the 2-year gap in my work history. The first time I fielded the question, I was still quite self-conscious about stopping out of medicine—I mean, who DOES that? I answered, hesitantly, “Well, I was a full-time mom.” The chirpy young voice on the other end of the phone line starting chuckling, “That’s awesome Dr. Fountain! We just have to make sure you weren’t institutionalized or incarcerated.”

#### POST SCRIPT

This was one story. What is yours? If I had one take-home message to give it would be this: Don’t be discouraged along the journey in your professional (or even personal!) life. The one sure way to lose one’s dreams is to give up on them. Rejection doesn’t necessarily mean you’re not worthy or qualified. Sometimes it just means it wasn’t the right timing or fit. There is merit in trying again but be prepared--things won’t always work out. Have a plan B (or C) ready just in case. Failure is not only an option, but a near certainty for all of us. It may knock you down, but don’t let it knock you out.

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