

Rebecca Warren – 2015 Alumni

When Mrs Bushell asked me to write an article for the school newsletter I was delighted, but also slightly bemused as to what to write. What of my time since leaving school merited a mention to students aspiring to a diverse and compelling set of goals? I looked back on the ambitious but terrified 18-year-old me, about to commence a personal and educational journey to achieve a life-long dream of becoming a doctor and decided that actually, what I would have liked to read would be the sentiment expressed by Dr. Seuss in 'Oh The Places You'll Go!'

“Kid, you’ll move mountains! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So get on your way!”

Six years on from that nervous start, I can finally say that I am a doctor. After completing my A levels in Biology, Chemistry, Maths and Physics, I moved to the West Midlands to study Medicine at the University of Birmingham and will be starting work as a junior doctor on a Cardiology ward in July.

Firstly and most importantly, what I would like to say is believe in yourself. Have confidence and know that your hard work and dedication, no matter what obstacle you face nor how many diversions or detours you take, will get you exactly where you want to go. My journey through Medicine has seen me navigate personal challenges, fears, loss, love, exams and a pandemic but without these experiences I would not be the person – or the doctor - that I am today.

My time at University has been an incredible rollercoaster of fun, individual growth and academic challenges. Naturally, having always lived in the Fens, the first thing I did was to join the hill-walking Wilderness Medicine Society and head off on a weekend of mountain climbing and bouldering. Not only was this one of the highlights of my first year of University but also the catalyst to my strongest friendships, years of involvement in and my presidency of a unique society which trains medical and nursing students how to adapt their skillset in adverse conditions and environments.

Medical school itself was a welcome challenge, nevertheless fulfilling and enjoyable. At Birmingham, we study two years of lecture based physiology and anatomy followed by three years of clinical Medicine where I found a true passion for holistic, and patient centred general medicine and palliative care.

I took the opportunity after my third year of study to undertake a BSc in Clinical Anatomy. Here I had the immense privilege of working alongside cutting edge Paediatric Interventional Radiologists and Liver Transplant Surgeons at Birmingham Children’s Hospital, researching non-invasive solutions to postoperative transplant complications. My individual research project gained me a place at a national scientific conference at which my oral presentation was awarded first prize, despite sickening nerves. What I mean to say here is grasp the opportunities you are offered with both hands, no matter how daunting.

With my research-orientated brain satisfied and my linguistic brain relieved that it would never have to write another 20,000 word dissertation, I returned to my final two years of clinical Medicine placements across the West Midlands. These involve the shadowing of doctors on wards and in clinics in order to gain knowledge and practise the skills required of you as a junior doctor.

It would be remiss of me at this point not to mention COVID-19 and the huge impact this has had on the NHS, all its workers and the graduating cohort of junior doctors in 2020 who were accelerated into their posts mid-pandemic, for all of whom I have tremendous respect. As a final year medical student my first placement in January at the peak of the second wave was in a hugely pressured intensive care department in a district general hospital where it was our role to help position patients, aid on the ward round and update families. It was here that I fully understood the sentiment expressed by Paul Kalanithi when he wrote *“Science may provide the most useful way to organize empirical, reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp the most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honour, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue.”*

This experience impressed on me the raw vulnerability yet sheer resilience and beneficence of the healthcare professionals, the patients and the families I spoke to and society as a whole as everyone drew together to support one another.

It has been an absolute privilege to work alongside and be taught by these true heroes in the most pressured of times and despite this unusual academic year I am grateful to be graduating with such a range of experiences both clinically and outside of the medical environment.

If I have learnt anything from my time at Medical School, it is to live in the present, to accept challenges, face fears and believe in yourself as much as, if not more than others believe in you. My favourite saying, and one I live by is *‘Fears are paper tigers’* (Amelia Earhart).

Despite not yet having a plan past my first two years of being a junior doctor, I know that when offered the chance to do something that daunts me, I will say yes, because that is often what paves the way to exciting new adventures and I can’t wait.

Just remember...

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go...” (Dr. Seuss, ‘Oh The Places You’ll Go!’)