



Elizabeth Ungerman

I perceive myself as what most millennials would call a “hot mess”. As a young attending having love affairs with Cabernet Sauvignon and *The Bachelor*, the imposter syndrome that I have is real. Sometimes I even feel as though any resident who asks for my mentorship really needs their head examined. Despite how I view myself, I clearly must be doing something right. Or maybe, just maybe, I was surrounded by the right people at the right time that ever so perfectly steered me in the right direction knowing that I had the tenacity to thrive in situations that even Waste Management would steer clear from.

The first mentor that I ever really had was my dad. A Marine during ‘Nam and a career Fire Captain, my dad is a “take no crap” kind of guy. He is a bulldozer and only has ever succumbed to the rulers of the nuns who taught him in elementary school. He is my hero and I always have tried to emulate him. One day when I was 16—as he was picking me up after my summer job as a lifeguard—we got into a deep conversation, and he gave me the single, best piece of advice that I have ever received. “*Every decision you make in life—good or bad—will have consequences*”. As a 16-year-old, this blew my mind; but I knew that he was spot on. I thought back on the decisions that I made as a kid, and the one that immediately stood out was having to choose between playing soccer or gymnastics year-round. At the time, I was looking at colleges that I could play soccer for while also focusing on medical school preparation. The college that was at the top of my list literally didn’t have a gymnastics team. The college that I ended up attending would not have even made it to my list if I had chosen to pursue gymnastics. Crazy, right? My life could likely have taken a totally different trajectory.

I will say that outside of my dad (and mom of course!), my mentorship through college was pathetic all things considered. Hell, I was told by my mentor in college that I wasn’t serious enough for medical school—only to find out later that she didn’t get in herself and was probably just trying to discourage me like the bitter

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person that she was. But, as the feminist movement says, “*Nevertheless, she persisted.*” My first real academic mentors were Drs. Jim Peterson and Linda Pearce, who welcomed me with open arms into their lab. They knew that I had no experience but was motivated, punctual, and had a great attitude. I consider them my angels in disguise when it comes to my academic successes. They taught me how to critically read and write while also showing me that even though your research fails most of the time, what you learn from it will make your next project better.

Applying to medical school was a confusing process with limited guidance. My aunt was a CRNA and tried to help me (God bless her), but she didn’t know what was important for medical school. She did, however, give me the opportunity to shadow anesthesiologists at the hospital that she worked at which made me completely fall in love with the field that I practice in today. Despite being clueless on how to get where I wanted to go, my aunt provided me with the opportunity to figure out what my end goal was: Adult Cardiothoracic Anesthesiology. Navigating through medical school and the residency application process was daunting and confusing. There were so many things I would have done differently had I known but little did I realize that as I was trying to navigate blindly, I was forging my own path to the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center where I would be surrounded with a plethora of what you would call academic mentors.

I think when we hear the word “mentor” we automatically associate mentor with a professional colleague who is older, has more experience and has “been there, done that”. However, our professional endeavors should not encompass our lives (in theory) and we really need to expand our thoughts on the definition of a mentor. Mentors can be anywhere—they can be family, friends, religious community associates, colleagues, neighbors, even Peloton instructors. Mentors don’t even really have to be people as they can be books, nature or even a podcast. Mentors can be right in front of us when we don’t even really know it, setting examples or displaying attributes that we would like to emulate. Lastly—we can’t forget about ourselves. We can be our own mentors by using the things that we have learned in our lives—or even gut feelings—to guide our decisions; because, as my dad said, they all have consequences. Don’t forget about yourself. It took me a long time to realize that I made it far on practical advice and having a big cheering section.

As humans we are dynamic beings—how we find mentorship and guidance will be as equally dynamic. We need to keep our eyes open, and ears peeled to make sure that we expand our idea of a mentor that is outside of the academic box. In order to be successful academically, I realize that I need to make sure that I optimize myself as a well-rounded being outside of the academic realm. I have found that holding on to tidbits of practicality and using the “street smarts” developed by my non-academic mentors has been valuable for assessing and proceeding with different facets of life. If there is a will, there is a way—even if you only have yourself. If not, you can always crack a bottle of Cab and turn on *The Bachelor* to regroup—I promise, it works!