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**The Ripple Effect: Mentorship, Community, and the Road Towards Equity in Medicine**

*Amelia Stepniak*

“Why would you want to go to medical school? Don’t you want to have kids? How does your husband feel about the long road ahead?” These questions, with varying degrees of skepticism, surfaced time and again as I began to share my aspirations to pursue a career as a physician. Whether intentionally or not, each question hid an unspoken assumption that my ambitions were incompatible with societal expectations of womanhood. It was as though my pursuit of medicine needed to be justified against what others believed I was fit to become, a task none of my male peers have ever been required to solve in this context.

I am not alone in these experiences as nearly all my fellow female classmates and colleagues express similar instances of passed judgement and preconceived notions from others at one point or another. Despite women comprising the majority of incoming medical students today, there continues to be prevailing biases and prejudices from our presence in a male-dominated field. Gender inequity in medicine goes beyond uncomfortable social inquiries and has real world consequences when it comes to compensation and representation for women in comparison to their male counterparts. Women hold fewer leadership positions and are passed over more frequently for promotions in this workforce even when experiences and qualifications are controlled for. These disparities are not just numbers, but rather they represent lost opportunities, unrealized potential, and continue to uphold barriers for aspiring individuals of all backgrounds.

As a first-generation, low-income student, I’ve experienced firsthand how systemic inequities—whether rooted in gender, economic status, or other factors—create these barriers that limit success before students ever have the chance of reaching higher education. Entering this space has meant navigating an unfamiliar professional culture where access to mentorship, opportunities, and advocacy often appears unequal or hidden for those without connections. Yet, my journey has also been profoundly shaped by the guidance and encouragement of those who came before me. From my earliest days in college, my mentors were instrumental in helping me build confidence, recognize my value in this space, and navigate the complexities of pursuing medicine. Their influence not only propelled me forward but also instilled in me a deep desire to do the same for those who come after me. As such, I started mentoring high school students from low-income backgrounds through initiatives like Citizen Science Health and Diversity. Throughout my time there, I helped them find research opportunities and navigate how to potentially afford college down the road. These experiences allowed me to feel as though I had come full circle and reminded me of the struggles I faced just a few years prior.

Now in medical school, I am expanding my efforts by helping lead a new organization on campus aimed at supporting women interested in competitive specialties. This group not only provides networking and connections for research opportunities, but also fosters a supportive community where we can be honest about the struggles and hardships we face. At one of our first events of the semester, we invited a highly accomplished neurosurgeon to give a talk about her perspectives on burnout and working in a male-dominated specialty. She is a trailblazer in this field who candidly shared some of the obstacles she faced, from being underestimated in the operating room to balancing the demands of her intense career with her marriage. Her stories of persistence and resilience deeply resonated with the audience and reminded me of the importance of staying grounded in my "why."

As we listened to her speak about navigating setbacks and pushing forward despite doubts, both her own and of others, I reflected on what intrinsically drives me toward my goals. Medicine is not an easy path, and like many others, I’ve had moments of questioning whether I am cut out for this or if the sacrifices are going to be worth it in the end. Her journey reminded me that the strength to persevere lies in knowing why you chose this path and holding onto that purpose, even in the face of adversity. Her talk also highlighted the importance of community in navigating a demanding profession. She emphasized that no one succeeds alone and that leaning on your friends, mentors, and peers who uplift you can make all the difference. In that moment, I felt deeply grateful for the network of support I’ve started to build and inspired to continue doing the same for others.

These experiences in my life so far have ingrained an unwavering belief that success in medicine cannot be upheld on individual achievement, but rather the collective progress that happens when you lifting others as you climb. Through the organizations I’ve participated in and my broader efforts to mentor women interested in science, I aim to create opportunities so younger students can dismantle feelings of imposter syndrome and realize there is a place for them if they strive towards it. Whether through organizing workshops, facilitating mentorship opportunities, or simply offering guidance to those navigating their own challenges, I am deeply committed to paying forward the support and encouragement I have received. Equity across the spectrum is not just a lofty ideal, but rather a necessity for the integrity and progress of the field of medicine. True progress insists we learn from the inequities of our past and commit to a future where everyone, regardless of background, has an equal opportunity to grow. Medicine thrives on diverse thoughts, experiences, and perspectives, and achieving a more just environment is the only way to begin realizing the full potential of our collective humanity.

**Biography**

Amelia Stepniak is a first-year medical student at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Originally from Chicago, Amelia began her academic journey at Oakton Community College before transferring to Emory University on the Jack Kent Cooke Scholarship, where she earned a degree in biology. She then went on to complete a master’s in neurobiology from Northwestern University, where she developed her passion for translational neuro-oncology research.

As a first-generation, low-income student, Amelia is deeply committed to mentoring individuals from similar backgrounds, inspired by the transformative impacts her own mentors had on her academic and personal journey. She is dedicated to improving accessibility to medical education and supporting others in overcoming systemic barriers.

In her free time, Amelia enjoys birdwatching, hiking, and exploring the country on road trips. She hopes to integrate her clinical and research interests to ultimately advance patient care while empowering others to pursue their goals in medicine.