



## Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal

### **I Sound Like a Woman**

*Kristen Smith*

One of four kids, I'm standing in front of the classroom waiting my turn to present my science project to our sixth-grade class.

We're practicing our presentations for the school science fair coming up. My turn comes, I give my rehearsed presentation and await teacher feedback. To my surprise, the feedback isn't related to the project at all.

Rather, "Your voice is too high pitch to be taken seriously in science", is the feedback I receive. Mortified at the thought that

something was fundamentally wrong with my voice, I practice presenting at home later that night, forcing a deeper voice. I was

going to school in one of the poorest and most conservative counties in the State of Florida. This meant our primary education was subpar and most of my female schoolmates aspired to the 1950s era dream

of a house and perfect family. Aside from my male classmates, I was mostly alone with regard to my aspirations of studying

science or medicine in the future. After the comment from my sixth-grade science teacher whom I idolized, I had a great deal of doubt this would happen.

For many years this one comment will ring in my ears. It won't be until much later in my life that I question why this comment was given. Even though my teacher that day was female, and even though we live in society where women in science are explicitly encouraged, we still encounter implicit biases towards women in science and medicine. As I experienced early in life, these biases are learned and practiced from a young age. Perhaps the thing no woman wants to admit, we are often biased against our own gender. We have unwittingly internalized the cultural misogyny. Even though we desire more female leadership, we visualize a man being the leader, the attending physician, the NASA engineer. It's easier to visualize women as the nurse, the school teacher, and the nanny. I've been guilty of this many times. When a person in leadership is described to me using only their last name, such as a professor, I

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immediately conjure a picture of a male. When that picture is disrupted by realizing it's a woman being described, I immediately feel a sense of shame that a man was my default. Having years of education taken place in anti-feminist environment, I still have a good deal of unlearning to do. Years of self-reflection from this young event and many others since then has enabled me to not give into feeling lesser-than, or the need to fit into place.

Many years after my sixth-grade encounter, I'm receiving my white coat as a first-year medical student. I watch and applaud as my classmates walk across the stage one by one. For one particular student, a classmate sitting next to me leans over and says, "He just looks like a doctor". It'll be no surprise to anyone reading that the person getting his white coat this moment was a tall, slim, white man. In contrast to my sixth-grade self, I had no hesitation in identifying what exactly was said to me in that moment and the broader societal bias it underscored. It also immediately brought up the question, what does a physician not look like in the eyes of society? Surely, if someone in my class looks very much like a doctor, this implies other students do not look like one. The student sitting next to me was my

sixth-grade science teacher all over again. Those in leadership have a certain look, and that look is masculine. Those with a feminine voice do not sound like doctors. Growing up in a small conservative community, I saw misogyny and discrimination first hand and on full display. Now as an adult, I believe this experience has made it easier for me to see gender discrimination when it's attempting to be masked and palatable for society.

## Biography



Kristin Smith grew up on a farm in Palatka, FL. She majored in Microbiology & Cell Science at the University of Florida in 2011. After graduation, she became a high school math teacher in the same county she grew up in. After teaching several years, she transitioned to a position as a lab technician

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at the University of Florida in a respiratory neuromodulation lab. During this time, she decided to become a physician and started medical school at the University of Florida in 2019. She became co-President of her local AMWA chapter in Gainesville, FL where she co-hosts monthly meetings with UF Health female physicians.