Legends and Legacies Book Chapters

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Elizabeth Shpall, M.D.

Professor of Stem Cell Transplantation and Cellular Therapy
Elizabeth and husband Roy Jones, M.D., Ph.D., vacationed with sons Benjamin and Gregory in the Norwegian Fjords in 1997.

Skiing in Vail, Colorado, in December 2007 was great fun for this group, right to left, Elizabeth, her sister-in-law Debbie Rosenthal, sister Casey Shpall and sister Stephanie Shpall.

Sons Benjamin and Greg enjoyed sailing with Elizabeth in the British Virgin Islands in March 1993.

Daniel Minnehan, who had a stem cell transplant for leukemia in 2002, took his favorite physician, Elizabeth, on the Bad to the Bone Marrow Ride in 2007 to raise funds for transplantation research and recruit new stem cell donors.
My standard answer to the question “When did you decide to become a physician?” was “I always wanted to be a physician.” But writing my story forced me to review all the stages of my life, and, after taking the time to reflect upon them, I came to realize that my usual answer was not quite true. My father was a physician — an extremely talented and empathic general practitioner who was loved by his patients and often cared for several generations in a single family. Some of his patients who had minimal financial resources paid him with produce from their gardens or with homemade jam. He delivered babies, performed minor surgeries, and was a gifted diagnostician. Growing up, I often went with him on house calls and Sunday morning hospital rounds and in doing so developed a profound and lasting admiration for his craft. Such was my early exposure to the medical profession. At the time, I did not consciously plan a career in medicine although, in retrospect, the subliminal attraction must have been there.

In my younger years, the things that were important to me were my horse and our happy family life in the bucolic foothills of Colorado. My parents had built their dream home on a mountain east of Golden and the Coors Brewery. A creative architect had designed it to look like a green and white shoebox sticking up out of the mountain. One side of the house was entirely glass with sliding doors that led out to a very large terrace. On clear days, which occurred frequently in Colorado, we could see the Snowy Range Mountains in Wyoming. Deer or red fox would often visit us, and we always felt like part of nature. My dad’s friend, who sold horses, cattle and Indian jewelry, found me a gentle horse that was suitable for a 9-year-old. I named her Lady, and she could gallop as swiftly as the wind but was easy to control. Lady and I had many happy years together exploring the mountains around our neighborhood.

I recall with fondness the three wonderful years I spent in a serious academic program at rural Golden High School. As a freshman, I signed up for Latin and discovered a 70-year-old teacher who had refused to retire. The school board allowed her to continue teaching both Latin and classics. Since I was the only person who took her Latin course, I wound up having three years of private tutoring. I also had a great French teacher and again was lucky, as she taught the language and literature to only a handful of students for all three years. During this period, I came to realize that I would pursue some type of scholastic career, most likely in the area of arts and literature. My mother was from New York, and I decided that I wanted to study at a school on the east coast. The schools in that area that interested me the most were Harvard, Radcliffe and Brown. In the end I chose Brown because it had fine programs in classics in French and art history, two areas that I was
particularly interested in. Moreover, Brown was known to be quite diverse and forward-thinking in terms of its curriculum as well as its student body, and I found the idea of exposure to that kind of atmosphere appealing.

When I initially arrived at Brown University, I majored in classics with a minor in French, and I dreamed of working for the State Department. My mother, an extremely intelligent, intellectual and independent thinker, very subtly spoke of that period as being a time when women could be anything they wanted — Supreme Court justices, CEOs of major companies, physicians, scientists or architects, to name a few. My mother believed very deeply that women should pick difficult fields that they would enjoy and make contributions to the welfare of people everywhere. She was my greatest supporter and made me believe that I could really pursue and excel in whatever discipline I chose. Perhaps these ideas heightened my awareness of all the possibilities available to me. Then, during my first vacation from college, I noticed and was struck by how much my father still enjoyed practicing medicine. He studied a great deal, reading an enormous number of medical journals. In fact, he and I often discussed the medical issues he was interested in at the time. I guess that seeing him still retain his enthusiasm for medicine after all these years called up my childhood impressions of the practice of medicine and caused me finally to seriously consider it as a career.

When I returned to school in the fall, I took chemistry and biology courses to see whether I could handle them well enough to change my major to premed. This step set me on the path that would change the direction of my career and my life. I found that I liked the courses and did well in them. My studies at Brown gave me a great foundation for the challenging work that lay ahead. I loved the time I spent at Brown; those were wonderful years. Not only was I able to nurture my existing love of classics but also I discovered my love of biology while I was there. At Brown, I was fortunate to have a marvelous biology professor who truly instilled in me a love of science as well as a confidence in my scientific ability that I had never had before; for me, this truly opened the door to scientific inquiry. During these years, I spent several relaxing summers on the Cape with friends and even worked part time as a cocktail waitress. I think that these experiences helped round out my personality.

While I was in medical school and during my residency, I continued to expand my horizons intellectually, culturally and socially. I attended the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine and once again found that I had made a good choice. There, I was delighted to discover that I was part of a diverse, well-rounded and very talented class whose ranks included musicians and athletes, among others. Perhaps it was partly owing to the well-roundedness that stemmed from broad interests and talents, but, whatever
the reason, there was among our class a wonderful esprit de corps. I loved medical school. The combination of interesting people, group camaraderie and stimulating courses was energizing. My interests tended more toward internal medicine type disciplines; I did not really care for anatomy or surgery courses very much. I had so much fun during this time and honestly remember these years as among the most enjoyable of my life. I spent my final year of residency taking electives at the American Hospital in Paris, where I lived in the hospital with medical students. To be studying abroad and in Paris was exciting and provided me with an enriching and fabulous experience culturally. I decided to do my subsequent training in New York City. I was not truly bitten by the research bug until my fellowship at the Mount Sinai Hospital, where I trained under the mentorship of Dr. James Holland, chairman of Neoplastic Diseases. Dr. Holland not only taught me an enormous amount but also instilled in me the confidence to pursue a career in academic medicine.

Dr. Holland also introduced me to Dr. Roy Jones, who subsequently became my husband and without whom I could never have become a public speaker! My husband and I were recruited to Duke University, where we had an academically rewarding experience working in the Bone Marrow Transplant Program with Dr. William Peters. The premier transplant program for breast cancer patients was at Duke, and this was our interest at that time. We welcomed our first son while we were working at Duke. We then went to the University of Colorado to establish a Bone Marrow Transplant Program. There we spent over a decade building the program and enjoying a rapid and productive expansion of our careers and our family, with the addition of our second son. I was fortunate enough to be able to establish a cord blood bank, which tied in with my clinical work in cord blood transplantation and laboratory work on the ex vivo expansion of hematopoietic progenitor cells with what became a major focus on expanding cord blood.

Subsequently, my husband and I were recruited to M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in 2002. It has been a marvelous move professionally, affording us academic and clinical opportunities in our field that are unparalleled, including a state-of-the-art Good Manufactory Practice Laboratory for cellular therapy and the establishment of another cord blood bank in Houston. While the move was exciting for us, our two sons, who had been avid hockey players and snow-boarders in Colorado since age 4, did not share our enthusiasm about moving to Houston, which occurred when they were in the 6th and 8th grades. As a consolation, we kept our place in the Colorado mountains, which allowed the boys to continue their winter sports during vacations. Although they have never really adjusted to the weather in Houston, they have attended great schools and made very good
friends here. Our eldest son recently left to attend college at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business in Los Angeles, and our youngest son, who will graduate from high school next year, will also likely choose a college outside of Texas. Fortunately, they still enjoy visiting with us, particularly when we are in Colorado.

My advice to women who are faced with the decision of whether to move the family for the sake of career advancement is to look at the big picture. If you will be happier and professionally more fulfilled, your family will ultimately benefit from your ensuing comfort and security. Now that my sons are leaving for college, it has become apparent that developing activities that you can do with your friends or husband is critically important. Tennis has always been my major outlet, but I have just started taking golf lessons as another option for the future. Although family and work have always been my main priorities, I recommend developing a hobby you enjoy in order to keep a balanced existence. In terms of career, my best advice is to focus. In academic medicine, pick an area you like — either clinical, laboratory, or, if you have the skills, both — and build upon it. Most large projects you take on should relate to your area of expertise. The more you develop depth in a discipline, the easier it is to be academically successful.

Academic medicine is a wonderful career. It is gratifying to be involved in cutting-edge therapies that may really improve the outcome in patients. Additionally, academic medicine involves highly collaborative and satisfying relationships with interesting colleagues around the world. Balancing the professional and personal aspects of one’s life certainly presents challenges, but with focus and attention to your priorities, you can successfully blend the raising of children and a happy family life with professional success in the field of academic medicine.