

Blog

The 40-Year Old Med Student

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By Nathan Goldfein, MD

If you ask a physician, “When did you first realize you wanted to be a doctor,” chances are good they will say, “Since I was a little kid.” But there are plenty of doctors for whom medicine was not a foregone conclusion. I was one of those who made the choice to pursue medicine later in life.



It wasn't that I didn't like medicine; it was just that I hated school. Throughout my grade school years I struggled and struggled. After a lot of tears and testing, and many teachers saying that I was stupid and incapable of succeeding in a formal education setting, I was eventually diagnosed with dyslexia.

With this discovery of my dyslexia came a lot of well-meaning advice, which sometimes actually stood in the way. Despite my parents being told that I would probably not make it in college, I did go to college and managed to pass. Initially I chose biochemical engineering as my major. However, I heard that the pay was lousy and that I would need to do additional schooling. I went to my counselor and asked, “What can I complete in four years and get a good job?” I was told only engineering. I switched to mechanical engineering and loved it! Throughout my life the way I compensated for my learning disability was to get creative and develop innovative ways to solve problems. Now I had found a career where I could put this skill set to good use.

Once out of school, I worked on projects designing missiles, satellites and air brakes, earning 10 patents in the process. I moved on to develop more than 150 innovative chemical products, including a biosurfactant that eats oil after it's spilled on dirt – a breakthrough product for mitigating oil spills. I also developed The Classic product line, which included the first waterless wash and wax. I later sold that company to Pennzoil.

Shortly thereafter, I changed course completely and started my journey into medicine. Why make such a drastic shift to become a physician, especially in light of my learning disability? For starters, my father was a doctor so I already knew a bit about the profession, but beyond that it essentially came down to two life-changing experiences.

The first was being in a situation where I wanted to help someone but couldn't. I was on a flight when a passenger had a heart attack. I felt helpless because I didn't know how to help him. It was an awful feeling.

The second was a lingering regret from earlier in my life. In 1986, when I was designing and manufacturing air brake systems, NFL players went on strike. I

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was playing Texas League football in Houston at the time. I wanted to try out for the Houston Oilers, but didn't. I always regretted not trying and vowed not to ever let that happen again. The bottom line was that I was interested in medicine and didn't want another opportunity to pass me by. Although I was sure I wouldn't get into medical school, let alone finish, I didn't want to fast-forward to my 70s, sitting in a rocking chair, filled with another regret about a chance I didn't take because I was afraid of failure.

With that in mind, I started working on my med school prerequisites at age 38. I took the MCAT and passed, despite not completing the whole test because of the dyslexia. At 40, when most guys buy a sports car or go skydiving (which I also did) as their midlife crisis, I started medical school. I attended University of Arizona School of Medicine and nearly flunked anatomy. The complicated words and dyslexia didn't mix well. Thank God they didn't take off for spelling or I wouldn't be a physician today. As I took more clinical classes, I began to hit my stride. Clinical classes allowed me to use my problem-solving skills from my years as an engineer.

During my fourth year of med school, I still couldn't find a specialty that I wanted to pursue until I did a hospital medicine rotation. I loved it! I specialized in ICU medicine, and "suicide matched" to the one and only residency program that I applied to: the University of New Mexico. I liked ICU work so much that I traded ward shifts and clinic shifts for ICU shifts.

Hospital medicine requires problem-solving skills and developing innovative ways to provide care, especially in the ICU where you'll find the sickest patients. You won't read about how to provide this level of care in textbooks; it's an "in the trenches" kind of education.

Looking back, I know that I'm a better physician because of my engineering background, and even because of my dyslexia, because I've had to find ways to compensate for my limitations. I'm a blessed guy. I've worked hard, played hard and have the best family, which includes my wife, Rosa Linda (who I met on an airplane) and our three children: Ahava, Ziva and Samuel.

My advice for those thinking about a career in medicine is simple: You'll regret what you don't do more than what you do. It's always better to try and fail than play it safe and never take the risk.

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Sasha ortega

I love this! I'm 27 with three kiddos and decided 1 1/2 years ago I wanted to be a surgeon. I'm currently pursuing that goal. I was very shy telling others what I was doing at first because I felt that people would look at me funny and judge because

of my age. I also thought medical schools might do the same, but now I am starting to understand that my age and life experience is a plus, and I know what I want. Its funny I as well have some regrets, and didnt want to surpass any more opportunities! Thank you for your sharing your story!

8/24/2016 11:33:45 AM

Alice Minkoff

Awesome

8/22/2016 4:41:36 PM
