



Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma

Advancing Science, Fostering Relationships, and Building Careers

2021 Oriens Honorable Mention Essay Wendy Young Rockne, MD

Sitting in the back of an ambulance, my firefighting gear smeared with the blood of a three-year-old child, I realized that being a firefighter was no longer enough for me.

I was trying to explain to a frightened little girl why I had to leave her, and why it would be someone else who would repair the significant internal organ damage sustained when a parent had unknowingly backed over her in their driveway. While I stabilized and prepped her tiny body for the incoming flight crew, she constantly called for me: "Holly*, you won't leave me, right? Holly, you'll make it better, right?" And then as the helicopter touched down, the ultimate question: "Holly, why can't you go with me? Why aren't you my doctor?" That instant remains one of the defining moments of my life. I realized that while I loved being a firefighter and a paramedic, I wasn't going to fix that little girl, I was passing her on to the trauma surgeon who would. *I wanted to be that surgeon.*

I entered my first firefighting academy boot camp as a nineteen-year-old girl on a whim; I spent the next decade as a professional firefighter and paramedic because the tenets I learned in the fire service resonated with me on a deep level. In retrospect, firefighting served both to refine my character and to prepare me for a future career in surgery. Responding to emergency situations taught me the concept of ultimate responsibility, and that when something needs to be accomplished, excuses are irrelevant. Spending every shift as an integral part of a team taught me to work efficiently under authority, and to quickly assess a situation and make independent decisions when functioning as a leader. Having to master a vast array of physical skills far outside my comfort zone taught me that natural ability and aptitude only go so far; the real difference between success and failure is hours, days, months, and years of determined work.

The aspects that drew me to the fire service are strikingly similar to what is required to be a successful surgeon, and much of what draws me specifically to trauma and acute care surgery. In medical school I enjoyed learning various aspects of each specialty: the complex management of critically ill patients, the technical skills required for complicated procedures, and the clinical acumen necessary to pick up slight indicators of underlying disease. Trauma surgery, however, is the one specialty where I found all of this combined. Working with surgeons from the OR to the surgical ICU taught me that it is not enough to simply practice a physical skillset, have keen clinical reasoning, or maintain a solid understanding of complex physiologic processes. To be a trauma surgeon requires mastery and integration of each of these skills, coupled with the wisdom to know when and how to intercede: a lifelong challenge I find both exciting and invigorating.

I'm often asked if leaving the fire service to start over on the long road to trauma surgery has been worth it. On some of those particularly long residency days, when my tired hands shake and fumble as an impatient coworker grunts in shared frustration at my slowness, my beginner's ineptitude at this new skillset, I ask myself the same question. Why did I leave a vocation I loved and spent a decade mastering for the agonizingly slow drudgery of starting over from the bottom, building a new career from the ground up?

But then I remember that little girl in the back of my ambulance. I remember the faces of the countless trauma patients I saw during my years in the field, and the relentless, steadily growing desire throughout those years to learn more, to do more, to *help* more. That familiar desire rises and burns through my exhaustion, frustration, and doubt. I may have upended my entire life to be here, but I would gladly do it all over again, even on the worst of days. It's an honor and a privilege to be in this job, training for this incredible profession. I finally have an answer for that little girl, and for myself: I'm not that trauma surgeon yet, but I will be.