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Prompt #2

The Architecture of Advocacy: Beyond the Sum of Highs and Lows



Izza Arqam is a fourth-year student at NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine, graduating in May 2026. After earning her B.S. in Life Sciences from NYIT in 2022, where she was recognized on the Presidential Honors List and received the Pre-Clinical Education Award, she has dedicated her medical training to leadership and service. Her academic contributions include research on cranial development and anatomy education, which has led to national presentations and a peer-reviewed publication in the *Journal of Morphology*.

A steadfast advocate for her peers, she served as a Finance Committee Representative for all four years and as President of the Student Osteopathic Medical Association. Her commitment to mentorship is reflected in her work with Student Doctors for the American Red Cross and her participation in global health initiatives in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. Recognized with the Positive Strides Award for her contributions to the school community, she strives to balance rigorous clinical training with advocacy and service. Outside of medicine, she enjoys the precision of archery, swimming, and the arts.

The heat of the crowded bazaar in Pakistan was stifling, but the atmosphere turned colder when three men surrounded our car. They hurled profanities at my mother, attempting to intimidate her into paying for a "dent" that did not exist. From the moment they began yelling, I started to cry. At six years old, I understood the gravity of the situation; I recognized the dangerous imbalance of power—three aggressive men against a woman alone in a society that often demanded female silence for survival. I was paralyzed, yet I watched as my mother stood her ground. She did not shrink; she yelled back with fierce, unwavering strength, stating loudly that she would not be extorted.

Even when the police arrived, she never showed a flicker of fear. My crying only ceased when we drove away and she bought me a lollipop. As she handed it to me, she asked, "Why are you scared? We did nothing wrong." That afternoon, I received my first lesson in advocacy: the truth does not tremble, and one's worth is not up for negotiation. To negotiate one's worth is to concede that it is variable—that it can be chipped away by loud voices or systemic biases. My mother taught me that while prices in a bazaar are negotiable, human dignity is absolute. Protecting that dignity sometimes requires speaking as loudly as those trying to silence you.

This realization became the heartbeat of my journey toward medicine, echoing the mission of Dr. Linda Brodsky, who famously refused to let a powerful institution negotiate her value. She recognized that pay discrimination was an attempt to bargain with her worth as a physician. Like my mother, Dr. Brodsky understood that when you provide excellence, you do not owe the world a discount.

My mother's mentorship was forged in our home and eventually, the bustling streets of New York City. After raising me alone in Pakistan for eight years, she joined my father in NYC in 2009. I was thrust into a "melting pot" that felt like a pressure cooker. I struggled with a new language and academic standards, often returning to our apartment in tears, convinced I was less intelligent than my peers. My mother did not offer empty platitudes; she sat with me for hours, deconstructing lessons and rebuilding my confidence. She reminded me that my struggle was a chapter, not the book. This was my introduction to equity: the understanding that while we start from different places, our potential is identical.

This lesson was tested in high school. Having joined the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC), I took immense pride in my uniform. One afternoon, my grandmother visited. Seeing me in uniform, she beamed and told me how great I looked, filling me with a surge of belonging. But a moment later, she sighed, "If only you were a boy." The sting was sharp because it sought to retract the praise she had just given. My grandmother was not a bad person; she was simply a product of a society biased by gendered expectations. Yet, my mother refused to let those biases become my reality. She immediately intervened, declaring that her daughters were no less than any man. Advocacy, I realized, begins in our own communities by refusing to let even well-intentioned biases limit a person's horizon.

When I was accepted into NYITCOM's seven-year BS/DO program, the cultural pushback returned. Relatives questioned why a woman would choose such a demanding path. My mother stood as my primary advocate, shielding me from these critiques. Her

support mirrors Dr. Brodsky's work through WomenMDResources, helping women "get the jobs they want, the pay they deserve, and not become prisoners of their careers". My mother taught me that to have a successful career, one must first have the courage to claim it.

The rigors of medical school can strip away one's sense of self. During long nights studying for boards, I return to the lyrics of "You Say" by Lauren Daigle: "Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low? / Remind me once again just who I am because I need to know." In training, it is easy to believe you are only as good as your last exam score. My mother's mentorship served as the voice in that song. Whenever I called her, overwhelmed by the "lows" of a difficult rotation, she would say, "You can leave this program at any time. I will support you no matter what." This was the ultimate gift of advocacy: she gave me the autonomy to choose my path every day. By reminding me I was more than the "sum of my highs and lows," she gave me the resilience to stay.

Inspired by her, I have sought to be that voice for others. As President of the Student Osteopathic Medical Association (SOMA), I organized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) events focused on tangible solutions for marginalized students. I established mentorship programs and "SOMA socials" to ensure no student felt lost or undervalued, as I once did in NYC.

Currently, I personally mentor a junior medical student. When she feels buried by the curriculum, I offer her the same "steady hand" my mother offered me. I remind her that her value is intrinsic, not performance-based. I pay it forward by ensuring the next

generation enters the workforce with the self-awareness to demand the fair treatment Dr. Brodsky fought for.

Dr. Linda Brodsky transformed a personal legal battle into a movement. Similarly, my mother transformed her resilience into a blueprint for my career. I am committed to being a physician who not only heals patients but also heals the systems that limit my colleagues. I will continue to build spaces where every student knows they are more than the sum of their scores, and every woman is empowered to say, as my mother did in that bazaar, that she will not accept anything less than she deserves. We have done nothing wrong by dreaming big.