

Emma Theisen MS2

Rush Medical College: Chicago, IL

National AMWA Member (2018-current)

### The Folding Chair

Some people inherit heirlooms, some jewelry, photographs, or recipes. But I was fortunate enough to inherit gestures: my grandmother's open door, my father's character compass, and my teacher's steady faith. Together, these gestures built a sense of belonging that never needed permission. Only later did I come across Shirley Chisholm's words:

"If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

Upon reading this, I realized that I had been raised by people who carried their own chairs, and chairs for others, all along.

Colleen Theisen, my grandmother, never spoke outright about advocacy, but she lived it every day. To this day, she is my biggest inspiration for what it means to selflessly uplift the people around you. Grandma Theisen's home was always filled with cars in the driveway of friends and neighbors, the aroma of brewing decaf coffee wafting from the kitchen, and conversations, many of which revolved around the non-stop Euchre games. Her house was always filled with life, and she had an open-door policy that extended to the dozens of teenagers she fostered well into her elderly years. Each of the teenagers, whom my immediate family to this day considers one of their own, arrived with their own stories, but were all met with the same warmth. Watching Grandma Theisen take people in, whether it was the foster kids, friends in the community just needing conversation and a good meal, or getting all her grandkids and children together as much as possible, I learned belonging is something we create. She taught me that change begins at the level of one open door, or in her case, telling someone to pull up a chair to the dining room table to join in on a game of cards.

My father showed me that compassion and humility are deeply connected. He taught me that true understanding begins not with talking, but with listening. When I was young, he would tell me to seek rooms where everyone else was better than me, not to compete, but to learn. "You'll either rise to the occasion," he would say, "or you will learn from those who already have."

That lesson became a compass, though I didn't realize it until the summer I joined a jazz band camp. I was twelve, surrounded by much older students and some young adults who all seemed to speak a language of rhythm I barely understood. I came home that first day beyond overwhelmed, and practically begged my parents to let me quit. Of course, my parents said no, but my dad said we could re-evaluate if "you give it two weeks." Every evening, after he got home from work, he sat beside me going bar by bar until the notes and rhythm made sense. Slowly, I found the rhythm, not just in the music, but in myself. By the end of camp (yes, I did finish), I could keep up. What stayed with me wasn't the sound of the saxophones next to me, it

was the quiet steadiness of my father's persistence. He taught me that leadership does not require volume, but presence. I learned from him that belonging is not granted by others, it is something you grow into by showing up, again and again, until the music feels like home.

My high-school science teacher, Ms. Galoci, saw potential in me before I could see it myself. She encouraged me to enroll in her new engineering elective, a class where I was one of the few girls, surrounded by confidence I hadn't yet earned. She never told me I could do it, but rather she simply handed me the tools and expected that I would. Under her guidance, I helped build an underwater remotely operated vehicle, designed a self-sustaining aquaponics system, and even sat in meetings with city planners to discuss an environmental engineering project for our community. Her quiet certainty was its own kind of advocacy. She didn't just make space for me, but rather assumed I already belonged there. That faith became the foundation for how I now mentor others: not by telling them they can, but by showing them I expect they will.

If I could dedicate a gesture to my mentors, it would be the folding chair. To me, it represents what they each embodied: the courage to create space where none existed, the humility to keep showing up, and the faith to make room for someone else. They taught me that equity is not waiting for permission, it's unfolding the chair, sitting down, and then pulling up another for the person behind you.

Belonging was never given to me; it was built. In medicine, I want to keep unfolding chairs for the students who doubt they belong, for the patients who feel unseen, and for the women still waiting outside the room. Dr. Brodsky's mission reminds me that advocacy isn't a solo act, but an ever-growing table.

Bio:



Emma Theisen (she/her) is a second-year medical student at Rush Medical College. She first became involved with AMWA through the University of Michigan chapter during her undergraduate years before going on to serve as National Advocacy Chair, where she represented pre-medical students on the physician policy and advocacy committee. Emma was recognized as the 2023 AMWA Premedical Branch Member of the Year for her leadership and advocacy efforts.

Beyond AMWA, Emma is deeply engaged in health equity work. She founded and served as Executive Director for the Lunar Doula Collective, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit providing free bereavement doula support for reproductive loss. She also aided in establishing Community HealthEd, another nonprofit focused on public health education.

At Rush, Emma is involved in health policy and advocacy work within the state of Illinois and serves as President of the Rush Medical College AMWA Chapter. She also volunteers to teach anatomy and clinical skills to high school students from schools on the West Side of Chicago. Additionally, she works on quality improvement initiatives at student-run free clinics in Chicago.

In addition to her academic and advocacy work, Emma enjoys exploring the National Parks, gardening, and trying new restaurants in Chicago.