

Learning to Leave the Door Wide Open

Sanjana Davuluri

My first and most enduring mentor has been my mother. Although she is not in medicine, she was my earliest teacher of equity and advocacy, demonstrating through her career that women need not diminish their aspirations to meet others' expectations. In a male-dominated field that demanded long hours and frequent travel, she succeeded in an ambitious career while prioritizing time with me and urging me to pursue my goals unapologetically. Having navigated many barriers herself, she intentionally mentored and advocated for other women in her field by amplifying their voices, ensuring their contributions were recognized, and sponsoring junior colleagues for leadership roles, so they could advance together rather than alone. When others questioned whether this path was sustainable for a mother, she answered by raising a daughter who learned early on to pursue ambition without leaving others behind. She shaped how I approach medicine and mentorship, mirroring the legacy of women such as Dr. Linda Brodsky, who channeled personal conviction into meaningful change.

I fully appreciated the impact of my mother's example after entering the medical field, where I recognized recurring assumptions about balance, endurance, and ambition voiced by mentees, peers, and even senior role models. As I started clinical training and research, I encountered women who expanded my understanding of what was possible and demonstrated how success can be leveraged to support others. I saw departments led by women and women surgeons who navigated parenthood during training while remaining respected and supported by their teams. Like my mother, these physicians used their credibility and resources to advocate for flexibility and institutional support for those coming after them. In doing so, they reshaped the culture around them to make leadership and longevity in medicine more sustainable. Their examples showed me that success in medicine carries a responsibility to actively widen access for others.

These experiences motivated me to take on leadership roles focused on advocacy and mentorship. I joined the Association of Women Surgeons (AWS) and AMWA to build structures that reduce barriers to mentorship and allow for trainees to voice uncertainty openly and seek guidance more readily. I founded the AWS chapter at my medical school and served as its president, creating a formal avenue for students interested in surgery to collaborate and seek

advice from surgeons in various stages of their careers. At the national level through AMWA, I led the mentorship committee in multiple initiatives, including a speed-networking event at the annual meeting that enabled students to develop sustained relationships with physician mentors. By organizing panels, webinars, and networking events, I facilitated opportunities for students to ask the questions I once struggled to ask and learn about options I discovered only later on. I was motivated by the belief that access to these resources should not be exclusive or difficult to find. Mentorship should instead be structured and easily available by design.

The same commitment to equity guides how I mentor students on an individual level. Many women in medicine hesitate to pursue opportunities, not due to lack of ability or talent, but because the steps forward are unclear and daunting. Rather than offering reassurance alone, I work with mentees to identify interests, draft outreach messages, and find faculty whose work aligns with their goals, countering the isolation that disproportionately affects women in medicine. Drawing from my own initial hesitation, I encourage them to articulate their interests early and often. As a mentor and a leader, I have learned that building my own support system involves being a part of others' support systems as well, an approach that reflects the mentorship I received and the legacy I hope to continue.

If I were to dedicate a quote to honor my mentors, it would be: 'Leave the door wider than you found it.' This phrase captures the ideal I learned growing up that success is not a private achievement, but a responsibility to expand access for others. My mother modeled this principle by pursuing excellence while expanding opportunities for others beyond her own success. This also embodies the spirit that defined Dr. Linda Brodsky's legacy of transforming her own experiences into advocacy, opening doors for many generations of women physicians. For me, this phrase is a reminder to make the path through medicine more equitable for those who follow. Ultimately, paying it forward means measuring my success in medicine not solely by personal progress, but by the barriers I help remove for others. As a physician, I plan to open doors for others and widen access through mentorship and advocacy. In doing so, I hope to honor Dr. Brodsky and my mentors by contributing to a culture in medicine where success is shared, not solitary.