

Belonging Without Hiding

I was learning medicine, but I was also learning how to hide.

I had entered my third-year rotations with a newborn at home, breastfeeding and pumping my way through each service. By the time I reached OB-GYN, several months into clerkships, hiding had woven itself into my days. I slipped out to pump and slipped back in before anyone noticed, convincing myself that belonging required me to smooth over every edge that made me different from my peers.

The first time on OB-GYN that I asked to step away during rounds to pump, a first for me on any rotation, the request cracked open under apologies. I only spoke the word sorry, but beneath it lived the fuller confession:

Sorry for interrupting.

Sorry for needing care.

Sorry for a body that still remembered it was feeding my child.

My attending looked at me with calm confidence and kind eyes and said, “Stop apologizing. You belong here. Your needs are not interruptions.”

Those words shifted something in me that had been tightening for months.

Until that moment, I had treated my body like an inconvenience and my motherhood like something that needed to be tucked away to be taken seriously. I believed that belonging meant being invisible. If no one noticed my needs, maybe no one would question my capability.

But that day, she unlocked an empty office and said simply, “Use this anytime.”

It was such a small gesture, yet it felt like the world opening by a few inches. For the first time, medicine stretched to hold all of me instead of asking me to fold myself in half. I felt like I could be both a student and a mother, a learner and a caregiver, tired and still worthy of belonging.

After that, I moved differently. I stopped whispering when I needed to pump. I stopped apologizing when I asked for a moment to care for myself. I realized belonging was not something earned by staying quiet. It was something claimed by standing fully in who I was.

Once I understood that, I began to see it everywhere. The classmate who said sorry for stepping out to call her mother during a health scare. The resident who tiptoed through the process of requesting her own wedding leave, postponing her honeymoon because the schedule insisted her life pause a little longer. The student who told anyone who would listen that she wanted a surgical specialty but immediately explained that she was child-free, as though her choice of specialty needed defending.

That attending's words stayed with me.

You belong here.

Belonging, I have learned, is not something someone else hands you. It is something you hold for yourself and offer to the next person who needs it.

Dr. Linda Brodsky fought for a world where women physicians could get the positions they wanted, be paid what they deserved, and truly have it all. For me, the one word that captures that vision is belonging. Belonging means women do not have to hide their needs or justify their choices. It means every version of womanhood fits in medicine.

Belonging means there is room for all of us. The mother who pumps between patients. The resident who finds her joy in research. The woman who chooses independence without having to defend it. The student learning to care for others while learning to care for herself.

True gender equity begins with that kind of belonging. It grows in a culture where no one apologizes for their body, their limits, or their choices. It grows in a world where asking for rest or compassion is understood as a natural part of sustaining ourselves and sustaining others.

That OB-GYN may not remember the moment she opened that door. But I do. She showed me how culture shifts in small ways. She showed me that belonging grows when someone sees you fully and still makes room, reminding you that nothing about you needs to be hidden.

I try to carry that forward. I remind younger students they do not have to make themselves smaller to belong in this field. I tell them not to apologize for being tired or pregnant or grieving or unsure. I tell them not to apologize for being tired or pregnant or grieving or unsure. I want them to know their worth is not delicate or conditional. It is unwavering.

Motherhood has shown me how universal the longing for belonging is. Everyone wants to feel seen. Everyone wants to feel safe in their own story. Maybe that is why dermatology calls to me. At its heart, it is a field where people come hoping to feel more at home in their own skin, and that longing feels familiar.

When I think back to that day, I remember the hum of the pump, the soft rhythm of the monitors, and the way uncertainty sat heavy in my chest. I remember walking into that room feeling like an outsider and walking out feeling something different. Still tired, still human, but no longer hiding.

I think that is where belonging begins. Not in silence or perfection, but in the decision to stop apologizing for who you are.

That is the physician I hope to become. The one who leaves the door open. The one who tells the next woman she belongs before she even knows she needs to hear it.

Because belonging, once it takes root, expands. It spreads through hallways and exam rooms until it becomes the way medicine feels. Steady, welcoming, and whole.

Biography



Amber Nelson-Fuller (she/her) is a third-year medical student at the Indiana University School of Medicine. A lifelong Hoosier, she earned her bachelor's degree in biology with minors in chemistry and psychology from Indiana University. Since joining the American Medical Women's Association in 2023, she has served in leadership for her campus chapter, most recently as Conference Chair. She also serves as a student lead for Indiana Dermatology Trainee Advocacy Day, working to expand dermatology-focused policy engagement and education across the state. Her academic interests include dermatology, LGBTQ+-affirming care, and addressing racial and structural disparities in health outcomes. As a nontraditional student balancing medical training with marriage and motherhood, she brings a grounded, inclusive perspective to her work and hopes to build a career centered on equitable, community-rooted dermatologic care.