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Conversations with Dr. Rowena Spencer (1922–2014): The First American Woman Pediatric Surgeon

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Part I: The Education of a Pediatric Surgeon

It was the Fall of 1958.

Rowena Spencer was establishing a reputation as a talented and dedicated pediatric surgeon. In her thirties, she was an Assistant Professor at Louisiana State University (LSU) in New Orleans. She had already separated her first pair of conjoined twins, an area of specialization within pediatric surgery that would interest her throughout her career and in her retirement.

My father, a New Yorker, was beginning his academic career. At twenty-eight, and with a PhD from the University of Iowa, he was the first biochemist to join the research group of Gerald Berenson, the LSU cardiologist who was just beginning his six decades of research into the factors that contribute to cardiovascular disease.

Rowena and my father often ate lunch together in LSU's common faculty dining room. Rowena usually joined the biomedical scientists at their table—that is how she and my father first met.

My mother, twenty-two, was pregnant with her first child, expecting to give birth in early November.

My parents, who had recently moved to New Orleans, needed a pediatrician for their expected baby. They consulted Rowena for a recommendation.

Wanting the baby to have the best possible medical care, Rowena referred them to her colleague Sue Schaefer, the head of pediatrics at Touro Infirmary. During our family's six years in New Orleans, Dr. Schaefer would become an important source of guidance and encouragement to my parents, who had no other family members nearby yet were raising four young boys, eighteen months apart.

Figure 1: Rowena Spencer as an assistant professor of surgery at LSU School of Medicine during the early 1960s



Photo credit: Miscenich, 1960.

On a Sunday afternoon in mid-November—shortly after the first baby was born—Rowena visited my parent's walk-up apartment on Plum Street in the Garden District. She brought the baby a gift, held him, and sang to him.

Approximately eighteen months later, I was born. Both my older sibling and I later became Rowena's surgical patients, further strengthening our family's friendship with her.

Our family did not realize it then, but many years later we learned that Rowena was one of the first women in the country—if not the first—to specialize in pediatric surgery.

Rowena was born in 1922 in Shreveport, Louisiana. She was the third of four daughters in a family that encouraged her academic success. Her interest in medicine was inspired by her father—an orthopedic surgeon—and nine other doctors in her extended family.

In 1943, Rowena graduated from LSU in Baton Rouge. Then, like her father, she entered medical school at Johns Hopkins University. She was one of four women in her class, receiving her medical degree in 1947.

From 1947 to 1948, Rowena continued at Hopkins, becoming the institution's first woman to hold an internship in surgery, working with Alfred Blaylock and surgical technician Vivien Thomas. The following year, she began her training in pediatric surgery at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia with C. Everett Koop. From 1949 to 1950, she held the role of "assistant in surgery" with Alton Ochsner at Tulane University. During 1950-1953, she held residencies in pediatrics and surgery at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. In the fall of 1952, while Rowena was still completing her surgical residency, she joined the surgery faculty at LSU, the first woman to be appointed to this role. In 1954, she received further

specialized training in pediatric surgery with Theodor Ehrenpreis at the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Sweden.

Figure 2: Rowena Spencer in an undated photograph



Photo credit: The Historic New Orleans Collection, Gift of Rowena Spencer, 2003.0109.1

Rowena returned to New Orleans and began to build LSU's pediatric surgery program. Unlike many other doctors in the Deep South of the 1950s, she treated all her patients in one common ward, refusing to segregate them on the basis of race. Many years later, she shared with me a concise explanation for her decision, which she never doubted. "Green, blue, or purple—what difference does a baby's color make. A baby is a baby."

Rowena remained in New Orleans throughout her career. She retired from surgery in 1984 and began writing a comprehensive textbook on conjoined twins, titled *Conjoined Twins: Developmental Malformations and Clinical Implications*.

It was published in 2003 by Johns Hopkins University Press and is considered to be the definitive work in its field.

In 1964, our family moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where my father joined the faculty of New Mexico State University. Four years later, we moved to Omaha, Nebraska, where my father remained on the faculty of Creighton University for over four decades.

During our years in New Mexico and Nebraska, my parents apparently had minimal contact with Rowena, yet whenever they talked about our family's time in New Orleans, they often mentioned her. They were among the many parents who trusted her surgical judgement and valued her kindness, conviction, intelligence, and enthusiasm.

In 2010, when my father died at the age of eighty, my mother and I began to wonder about Rowena. We learned that she had moved to Alexandria, Virginia, to be near family. We subsequently arranged to meet her in her apartment, a visit that was particularly memorable for us given the passing of years since my mother last met Rowena. She died in 2014 at the age of ninety-one. She is buried in the Spencer Cemetery in Nebo, Louisiana. Her gravestone reads "Pioneering Surgeon Dedicated to Children."

She is remembered for her extraordinary commitment to her patients and their families—a bond she described early in her career as "the joy of saving a whole life, not just a few years of one."

Now, ten years after her death, we also view her life in a broader context and further recognize

her as an innovator and early leader in the field of pediatric surgery; an advocate for racial equality in medical care; and a source of inspiration to women who are pursuing careers in medicine.

Part II: Reflections on Life, Medicine, and Family

Rowena and I first spoke in February of 2011. That led to other conversations on diverse topics, both medical and non-medical. We continued to speak, by phone and in person, until several months before her death. During these conversations I took notes, and I was able to record her most memorable observations and aphorisms. Now, ten years later, her remarks seem even more relevant.

She described herself as a “baby doctor with strong opinions.” She spoke quickly, with a discernible Louisiana accent. She was formal and precise when needed, as might be expected of a surgeon, yet she was also self-deprecatory and spontaneous, evoking images of her childhood in rural Central Louisiana. She sometimes whistled.

Here are her words.

About Herself

On her enthusiasm for babies:

I love babies more than a mule can kick.

On persistence:

I happen to be hardheaded and stubborn, and I don't let anything stand in my way if it's humanly possible.

On aging:

I don't fret about it. I just let it do what it's going to do.

On her life:

It has been interesting, without question. It's been a pretty good handful.

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Pediatric Surgery

On her passion for the field:

I enjoyed every minute of surgery. I love the field. I loved taking care of babies.

On the most enjoyable part of her work:

Holding the babies. It was a gift to handle little babies. There is no feeling in this world that matches wrapping up that baby in your arms.

On her approach to pediatric surgery:

Plan the procedure. Do what you plan, and get it done promptly.

On the commitment needed to be a pediatric surgeon:

If it's my baby and I am responsible for it, I'm going to be there. You just can't turn around and walk off. You can't just go fishing.

* * *

Patients

On babies:

They make life worth living.

On her relationship with her patients:

I felt that my patients were my babies. I felt mentally and physically attached to them.

Medical Training

Of the demands of the field:

It was worth it.

On her experience as a medical student at Johns Hopkins:

It was built for me. The minute I laid eyes on it, I knew it was my place. I loved every minute of it. It was an honor and a privilege.

Advice

For surgical residents and pediatric surgery fellows:

You have to have compassion. You have to have strong sympathy for the children you are working on. You have to make the experience positive for the child.

For medical students and residents:

You can't just dump a baby on the exam table.

For young people:

Don't be discouraged. Don't quit. Keep going.

Family, Friends, and Colleagues

On her father, Lewis Cass Spencer, in whose memory she established an endowed chair at Johns Hopkins:

We both loved the country. We both ended up loving surgery. We had a great deal in common. We both loved each other very dearly.

On Vivien Thomas, a mentor in surgical techniques at Johns Hopkins:

He and I were like a kitten and a warm brick. We got along very well together. He was a gentleman and wonderful to work with.

On Suzanne Schaefer, the head of pediatrics at Touro Infirmary:

She was a remarkable woman. We treated many a baby. She knew her babies and she loved her babies.

Interests

On writing:

I have always liked to write. I am obsessive about writing. It has to be easy to read and easy to understand.

On whistling:

You might say I'm a congenital whistler. It would be out of character for me not to whistle.

Her favorite tune to whistle:

"Rock-A-Bye, Baby"

Coda

Her usual way of concluding conversations:

Love to all.

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Reference

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