

Gina Cuyler, MD FACP brief autobiography:



I was born in Panama, Central America. My dad died suddenly when I was 2 years old, leaving my mom responsible for raising me on her own. The opportunities for women at that time in Panama were very limited so we packed what we could into two suitcases and came to New York City, a place where we did not have family or friends. Having no place to stay, we went to a hotel for women until my mom could find better accommodations. We had very little but I remember my mom telling me that while she worked 3 jobs to provide for us, my job was to go to school and get an education. We were hungry and homeless many times but we did not give up.

I had to overcome many obstacles in life to succeed. I wanted to be a physician since I was 4 years old. However, I had no role models in my family for that. I asked a lot of questions and stepped out of my comfort zone. Even though I was a shy child, I had to push through that. At first I went to Catholic school but it was too expensive for my mother to afford. In pursuit of a better education for me, she moved us into a better public school district which was in a white neighborhood.

I was the only black kid in all white classes. Classes were set up according to each child's academic ability. The school assumed I would not be very smart despite me being an A student at my prior school. My mother pressed them to place me in more challenging classes because she knew I could handle the material. When I arrived at my new class the teacher told me I would never amount to anything and that I was nothing. Sometimes my classmates would call me racial slurs on the way to school. It was very challenging! I felt like I didn't fit in. I was too "black" for the white kids that lived in the neighborhood and too "white" for the black kids who were bussed into the school from a distant poverty stricken black neighborhood. Eventually however, I made some friends that accepted me for who I was.

It was in junior high that I went from hopeless to hopeful. At one point, God showed me He had my back when I found a \$10 bill in a puddle to pay for the cost of a book I needed for school. My mom had given me her lunch money for the week to purchase the book and that money replaced what she had given me. Sometimes you can't see how things are going to work out. However, if you have faith to step out and trust, there will be a way. I've had to forgive a lot of people and also to be forgiven. Forgiveness is a way of life – it is essential.

I wanted to go to college but it was too expensive. Poverty was a real issue for us. I received an academic scholarship (because of my good grades) to go the New York University. While there I was mugged several times in New York City. I also had all my books stolen in college, the money for which I had worked all summer. A family friend that we reached out to for help purchased some replacement books. This taught me that we need to ask for help at times to fulfill our goals in life.

I was accepted to medical school at the University of Rochester and wanted to be in a less violent place than NYC so I came to Rochester. There were very few minority medical students or faculty here at that time. I did not feel welcome initially at the school. I had to learn to not be bitter and to forgive in the face of such adversity. When I was a medical student and medical resident, patients would sometimes refuse my care because of my color or assume that I was part of the cleaning staff or food service (though those are honorable ways to work, I was dressed as a healthcare provider). Initially, I would feel ashamed or embarrassed as though it was my fault when I encountered such prejudice. I have learned that the problem is external to me and that it is helpful to share it with someone who understands. Praying through these times was very helpful to me.

My mom's example helped me not give up through it all. If she did not give up when she lost her husband, moved to a new country, persevered through hunger and homelessness then I couldn't give up either. For her those were not STOPS but forks in the road, obstacles to get around, under or over. I think that is part of the reason I have made it when others have not. I think I took advantage of opportunities that came my way and applied myself. I didn't give into fear, sought help when needed, recognized God had a plan for me and I got engaged with His plan. I refused to believe the negative things some people said and believed God instead.

Today I am an Internal Medicine physician, owner of my own company, Comprehension Internal Medicine PLLC, and happily married to a Rochesterian. I teach medical students and I also run a nonprofit organization, Black Physicians Network of Greater Rochester which helps minority students pursue careers in medicine. I feel that I can give back to my community by helping young people pursue their dreams.

I would like to say to young people today: "Avoid dream killers – people who tell you that you can't reach your goals. Surround yourself with people who believe you can accomplish your dreams. Remember that you can learn from positive people and negative people. Remember that you have something special and unique to share with the world. Be bold and dare to make your dreams a reality."

Editor's Note: Material drawn from an interview with Gina for the *Creating Hope* video.