



A Summer's Event, A Lifetime Decision



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"Please evacuate the area!" "Please do not stop to collect your belongings!" "Leave the area now, this is an emergency!" These words filled our ears as the pungent odor filled our nostrils. Chaos was all around, mothers yelling at their children to get out of the pool and lifeguards opening the emergency exit gates. Soon the sirens could be heard,

getting louder as they neared the swimming pool. It is all very much a blur, as often frightening situations are as they become your past and not the present. The details, that is, are a blur, but the result of that day that was not supposed to happen is not.

We were not supposed to be there. We had seldom been there previously, but this summer was different. My younger sister and I grew up in a small town in the northern panhandle of West Virginia. Summer days in our preteen years were spent without our mother at the local swimming pool, which was within walking distance. This summer was different, however, in that the local swimming pool had a broken pump that was going to require more money than the city coffers had to fix. The only alternative was a pool several miles away, and my sister and I knew we would go infrequently as parents had other chores to do. That day was different. My mother had dropped us off and would be picking us up later in the afternoon.

I was not supposed to be there. That summer I had contracted whooping cough and was hospitalized for a few days in the makeshift hospital ward of the local family practitioner. By virtue of the fact that I had a bad cough, especially one that required hospitalization, my summer full of playing outside and swimming was finished. But this was an especially hot and humid day, as summers in the Ohio Valley can be, and my sister and I were granted a reprieve and allowed to go to the swimming pool.

We had not been there long when we heard a loud "pop," saw a cloud of smoke coming from a room adjacent to the bathhouse and heard the announcements to leave the area. As I replay the day in my head, I can feel the heat of the summer sun on my back, the cool water as I cannonballed into the pool, and the yelling and chaotic sounds of many fearful people trying to exit an area all at once. Little did I know that such an ordinary day would turn out to have such a profound influence on my life.

As my sister and I were running away from the pool area, a neighbor in a car offered us a ride to the fire station, where we would be safer and could contact our mother. The fire station was a few miles down the road and a scary sight to an 11-year-old. The volunteer firefighters were out among the children and the adults in bathing suits, who were still trying to understand why they were having some trouble breathing. The chlorine gas tank exploded, we were told, and the caretaker who was in the room at the time was badly injured. We sat down in front of the station, as we were told to do, and as the firefighter saw that we were not hurt or having trouble breathing, he went to look at more of the stream of frightened people coming toward him. My younger sister and I were left to watch the firefighters work, trying to triage through people as fast as they could and giving oxygen to those who needed it. They seemed very skillful, confident, knowledgeable and compassionate. Their knowledge had a limit, though,

and they had to decide which patients to take to the nearest hospital, 25 miles away, for definitive care.

I was afraid, certainly, but my curiosity was fueled by this strange turn of events. How did people know how to help other people in this life-or-death situation? How did the ordinary people that I saw every day know how to stay calm in a difficult situation and take steps to see that their neighbors, and maybe even people they loved, were safe? How did people know how to "fix" others, to heal the body, and encourage and calm the soul? I'd seen my parents comfort me when I fell in the gravel driveway time after time over the summer I learned to ride my bicycle. But this seemed deeper and more difficult.

It was then that I decided I wanted the knowledge and the ability to heal. I wanted to make the difficult decisions of how to manage an illness or an accident. I wanted to make a broken body whole again, if it was God's will. I wanted to comfort with my touch and with my words.

My sister and I were fine, and soon my panicked mother came to pick us out from the crowd. The afternoon's events were the topic of conversation later that evening as she prepared dinner. I don't remember if it was that night, or one soon to come, that another pivotal moment in my life would come. This would be when I shared my decision with my father. A father can have such a profound impact on his daughter, sometimes not even realizing it. I was nervous about telling him about the decision, because I valued his opinion very much. He thought things out carefully, weighing the different points from many angles. His views were conservative, and I wasn't even sure there were female physicians. He was grilling over our charcoal grill, making sure the hamburgers were just right, when I told him. "I want to be a doctor – I want to know how to help people when they are sick or in an accident like we saw." I held my breath as I waited for his response, knowing that if he disagreed or thought that I couldn't do it, I would not argue with him. Arguing about such important things was not what a young girl did with her father. To my utter amazement, he confirmed what I already knew. I had the intelligence to do it. "It will be hard, but I think you can do it," he said.

Many people have asked me over the years if my father is also a physician. I always think it's a little sad and ironic that they do not ask if my mother is a physician, but I give them an answer that surprises them. "No, there are no other physicians in my family." I have an aunt who is a nurse, but my father is retired from a steel company, where he worked as a computer systems manager. My mother has secretarial training, but took on the daunting task of making a house into a loving and secure home for her husband and two young daughters. Despite their lack of medical training, my parents and other family members would demonstrate what it meant to work hard for something you believe in and how important it is to take care of others, whether it was nursing a sick relative to health or taking some dinner to the very poor gentleman who lived behind my grandmother's house. These were not lessons I read from a book, but the sort of lessons that seep into your soul over your lifetime. These lessons can be useful in many other vocations, but they are imperative for the heart of a physician.

And so, from that time on, I pursued, and continue to pursue, the art and privilege of practicing medicine. **LM**

Note: Dr. Rash practices Pediatrics with Louisville Pediatric Specialists PSC.