Women in Thoracic Surgery

WTS/ Scanlan Traveling Mentorship Award

Robin Anna Marie Boyer
am on a November morning and I am staring at the beating heart of a 5 day old infant. During the next four hours; every doubt and discouraging remark I had ever encountered was rapidly ablated. The field of congenital cardiothoracic surgery had been introduced to me after waking up in an emergency room at the age of 4 due to a cardiac defect. 21 years later; as a female and first generation college student, my career aspirations have been highly subject to denunciation. Fortunately, my chordae tendinae of steel are more than capable of enduring.
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I assumed under the Women in Thoracic Surgery/ Scanlan Traveling Mentorship, I would be training under Dr. Cynthia Herrington at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. However, the award provided much more than I could have imagined. By allowing me to attend every pediatric cardiac surgery case at CHLA, Dr. Herrington’s contribution went far beyond instruction in the operating room. The training and rapport I have made here have already been substantial in driving my educational endeavors forward. Dr. Herrington confirmed my belief that women are not only capable of becoming pediatric cardiothoracic surgeons, they excel at it.

My 6 am start time began by rounding the unit with the cardiothoracic fellow Dr. Aaron Abarbanell and USC resident Dr. Daniel Logsdon. The insight they provided on the expectations of a training cardiac surgeon and endless support was invaluable. With their aid, I learned a wealth of information including how to interpret the basics of a pediatric echo and networked to procure a prodigious cardiac research position. They are undoubtedly among the most humble and genuinely compassionate individuals I have had the pleasure of working with.
Approximately four surgeries were scheduled each day. Dr. Herrington advised me to attend clinic between cases with the chief, Dr. Vaughn Starnes (pictured left with Pamela Faire NP). While in primary school, I wrote my required reports on the pioneers of cardiac surgery which included surgeons such as Dr. Blalock, Dr. Cooley, Dr. Bailey and Dr. Starnes. The Dr. Starnes that performed the first living donor lobar lung transplant I wrote about as a child was the same surgeon I had the privilege of learning from every Monday and Thursday. The elegance, speed and grace his hands achieved while operating is something I aspire to. He made even the most complex cases seem effortless. The opportunity to work with one of my childhood role models was an experience words will never express my gratitude for.
A sincere thank you to The Women In Thoracic Surgery, Scanlan, Dr. Herrington, Dr. Starnes, Dr. Abarbanell, Dr. Logsdon, Dr. Subramanyan, Dr. Wells, Dr. Kim, Dr. Kallin, Pam Faire, Angela Jimenez, the OR staff, and everyone else at CHLA who made this experience wonderful.

As if this scholarship had not provided enough, I was able to learn from Yale trained professor of surgery Dr. Kim, distinguished professor of surgery and medical board author Dr. Wells, Kaiser Permanente congenital surgeon Dr. Kallin and USC professor surgeon-scientist Dr. Subramanyan. Like a pledged, I attempted to absorb all that I could from them. Knowledge such as the difference between a cor triatriatum and a supravalvular mitral ring has been ingrained into my memory. One of my most appreciated events was attending a lecture provided by Dr. Subramanyan on cardiopulmonary bypass circuitry after which I was given the profound opportunity to take part in his research over the next year.

As my last day at USC/Children’s Hospital Los Angeles was coming to a close, I was exiting the operating room when a shipment of Cryolife products were delivered. I vividly recalled the first heart I procured for Cryolife at the age of 22 and how now, three years later I witnessed a graft I obtained being utilized in surgery. This bittersweet ending allowed me to reflect on where I started and how far I have come. I will continue to strive toward becoming a congenital cardiothoracic surgeon and maybe one day, be able to work alongside these prestigious cardiothoracic surgeons again.

Pediatric cardiothoracic procedures at USC/CHLA included;

- Fontan, Norwood, Glenn, BT Shunt, ASD/VSD Repair, Truncus Arteriosus, D/L Transposition, Ravitch, Ross, Rastelli, Complete AV Canal, Cor Triatriatum, Tetrology of Fallot Repair, Coarctation Repair, TAPVR Repair, PDA Ligation, Transplantation and Valve Replacement