

The Strength of a Surgeon

Surgery training is far from easy. It is rigorous. It will push you to what you think is your breaking point and then push you even further. No, it is not what it used to be. No longer does one live in the hospital and go without sleep for days. It is not a “boys only club” anymore. Nonetheless, it remains a uniquely difficult career path. This is apparent when you meet a stranger who is truly shocked when you tell him that you are going to work at 6AM on a Sunday. If he only knew that you have been there everyday at 5AM for the past week.

When I decided to become a surgeon, I thought of myself as someone with the exceptional capability of prevailing in the face of adversity and as a woman who could have held her own even in the days when “men were men.” I find it hard to believe that any woman who imagines a successful surgical career would not have this attitude. Now that I am here, I ask myself many questions: Who am I, where do I fit, and who will I become? Will I fit the mold of what it meant to be a surgeon of the past or will I forge my own path? Do I fall within the stereotypes of being “strong” like a man or “nurturing” like a woman? When my mother was angry with me and told me that I was “just like my father,” did that mean I behaved more like a man? And if I consider myself more feminine, will that make me less suited to be a surgeon?

I realize that these questions seem unnecessary in a society where women are marines and presidential candidates. Regardless, these are concerns that I had. It is through the great honor of being the 2016 Scanlan/WTS scholarship recipient, that I have found clarity. The simple answer is that it does not matter which sex you identify with and that today’s female surgeon does not have to be male surgeon of the past. Dr. Mara Antonoff has become a beloved mentor and inspiration. She is a surgeon, teacher, researcher, wife, and mother. With unparalleled energy and enthusiasm, she fulfills each of these duties and more. I know now that true strength is displayed through excellence in each of these roles. Dr. Antonoff has shown me that a woman can thrive as a surgeon while being both “strong” and “nurturing.” She gives me the courage to pursue a career in the male dominated field of cardiothoracic surgery. I am extremely grateful for the experience provided by Women in Thoracic Surgery and the Scanlan family, and hope to be an example for others who are interested in this extraordinary field.



