

Success as a Surgeon: an Interview with Dr. Nancy Gantt

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Success as a Surgeon: an Interview with Dr. Nancy Gantt on her experiences in training for surgery, managing a successful career, and striking a work-life balance



Dr. Nancy Gantt is Professor of Surgery at Northeastern Ohio Medical University and the Curriculum Director of M3 surgical clerkships. She is general surgeon at St. Elizabeth's Health Center in Youngstown, Ohio and the current vice president of AWS. Her medical areas of interest include breast surgery and surgical education, and she is passionate about AWS and mentoring young women who are initiating their careers in surgery. Her interview for AWStudent offers insight into her pathway to surgery and advice for budding surgeons.

How did you decide on a career in medicine?

Loving animals; I originally wanted to be a veterinarian. I grew up in Illinois and went to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I ended up being allergic to cats, which put a stop to my career aspirations of being a veterinarian. However, I loved biology and I admired the people I knew in medicine so I decided to apply to medical school. I didn't have much financial support to go to college, which required lots of loans and jobs, and also prevented me from doing much research. I attended the University Of Chicago Pritzker School Of Medicine.

When did you know you wanted to do surgery? What inspired you?

I started out interested in family medicine. I thought it was a great career where you have the ability to forge long-term relationships with your patients. I also relished the idea of caring for all age groups -- from children to senior citizens. However, I have to say that the surgeons at Pritzker were just truly dynamic and inspiring role models. I loved the problem-solving aspect of surgery, and the ability to work with your hands. I still remember observing Dr. Wolfgang Schraut explaining to a Crohn's disease patient about the process of the laparotomy that he was going to perform -- what would stay in, what would be cut out...it was all just very inspiring. I was intrigued by thoracic surgery and transplant surgery, and eventually was accepted to University of Pittsburgh's surgical residency program.

Were there other women in medical school who had similar aspirations to go into surgery?

There were a surprisingly large number of women who ended up matching in surgical residency programs, but I didn't really find out about their interest until Match Day. There was a Women in Medicine group when I was in medical school, which provided wonderful camaraderie.

What was residency like?

It was rigorous. Here's some advice -- if you want to do something, don't go to the world's busiest place for it. There was a liver transplant being conducted every 16 hours, but the opportunity for a resident to get a lot of hands-on involvement in the transplant procedures was slim due to the incredible amount of competition and number of patients on the service in need of care. Also, the lifestyle at that time was just crazy and I needed more balance. I eventually became interested in all of general surgery. I also really fell in love with breast surgery. It just felt truly amazing to work with women admitted for a mastectomy. There were few women surgeons back then, and it was always a gratifying experience to talk to patients before and after their surgery, and really support them. You really got to know them, and they were wonderful to care for.

What was your residency experience like as a woman?

It was pretty crazy. They accepted five Categorical residents a year and usually only one was a woman. Fortunately, the Chair of surgery, Dr. Henry Bahnson, was fantastic. He was completely gender-blind, yet very old school. He just trained you to be a skilled surgeon, no matter who you were. He never gave you any indication that you couldn't do what you wanted to do because you were a woman. There were plenty of women who left there as cardiothoracic and plastic surgeons.

How would you characterize your career now?

It has been fantastic. I became engaged to my husband (an orthopedic resident at the time) during the lab year of my residency. I wanted to go back to Chicago, but he wanted to move back to his hometown of Youngstown, Ohio, where they had only one young orthopedic surgeon at the time. I went into solo practice and taught medical students from Northeast Ohio Medical University. I had plenty of responsibilities, from managing the SICU to trauma call. I also became the surgical clerkship director, and served in that position for 20 years. I truly love my work developing curriculum and educating students. I have been advanced to full Professorship based primarily on my educational work. I haven't been as involved in clinical research, but that is currently being ramped up so the Joanie Abdu Comprehensive Breast Care Center at St. Elizabeth Health Care Center (of which I am co-director) can be accredited and offer clinical trial participation to our patients.

Have you faced any challenges balancing your personal and professional life?

With all of my responsibilities, it has been challenging. I realized that I needed to slow down when I was pregnant with my first child. I went into pre-term labor at 19 weeks, and that was a changing point for me. Professionally, I focused more on breast surgery, which made my schedule a bit more predictable. In 2006 I was diagnosed with stage I breast cancer. That was another wake-up call. My diagnosis did give me a new tool to relate to my breast surgery patients. It is nice how I can comfort them with my own experiences on dealing with breast cancer and connect with them on a new level. I eventually switched from solo private practice to being employed by the health system. The transition was good. For example, I went from having an \$85,000 bid for malpractice to not having to worry about it.

What would you say are the most rewarding features of being a member of AWS?

I would say the mentorship. AWS provides mentorship for women at every stage in their career. I

really regret not seeking out more mentors early on. AWS is just a fantastic source of support. Everybody has everyone else's back. If you want to succeed, you need to have approachable people you can talk to. AWS has these people. And the women of AWS can help you with more things than just networking. They can help with life issues too. They are just incredibly supportive.

What advice would you give to women who are just beginning their training?

Choose your partner very carefully. It is better to be alone than to be in a bad relationship. Be with someone who is supportive and thinks that what you do is very cool. My husband still thinks I look cute in scrubs!

Make time for your family. You need to pay attention to your parents and your children at all the stages of their lives. Cherish your friends and nurture your friendships.

If you will not make time for yourself, you will not stay healthy. Eat well and exercise.

Only say "yes" to the activities that you value or to the tasks that you think will significantly promote your career. Learn to say "no" to requests that don't.

Find mentors for all aspects of your life -- professional and personal.

Keep your hobbies and your passions. I love gardening, cooking, and reading for my book club.

Earn enough money to pay for chores you don't want to do, like cleaning your house, so that you have quality time to do what you want to do.

This interview was conducted by Melanie Subramanian, a second year medical student at Harvard Medical School in 2012.