

Telling Stories

FOR MALLORY ROWLEY '23, PRACTICING MEDICINE AND WRITING ABOUT IT ARE DEEPLY INTERTWINED.

Facing cancer is a life-altering experience, one marked by uncertainty, fear, and isolation. But for some patients, writing about their experiences and feelings provides a powerful coping outlet.

As a creative writing student at Colgate University, Rowley began writing about her experiences growing up with Crohn's disease. While working at Sloan Memorial Kettering Cancer Center as a breast surgery care coordinator, she began volunteering as a writing mentor for cancer patients, helping patients transfer their feelings and experiences to narrative work.

Now a third-year medical student at Upstate, Rowley has continued in that role, currently working virtually with three adult patients who all happen to have breast cancer. Rowley is also part of a team working to develop an app that could expand hospital writing programs nationwide. "The goal is to create an app that will be available to hospital systems seeking to engage patients in the writing community as part of their therapy. But we're only in the very early stages," she says.

Rowley's interest in the program was organic, as someone with a lot of experience as a patient. As a child with Crohn's disease, regular doctor appointments were the norm. While advances in medication have allowed her to be in remission since age 20, her eight years of illness left a permanent impact.

Rowley says she was always a creative kid who loved writing,

drawing, music, and dance. But her illness and lack of response to treatments at the time drew her to science. "I found myself spending increasing amounts of time combing journal databases. I scoured the literature for clinical trials or experimental therapies," she says. An inflammatory bowel specialist took an interest in her scientific inquiry and explained the risks and benefits of each treatment she discovered, an experience that piqued an interest in a career in healthcare.

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—MALLORY ROWLEY '23

Rowley graduated from Liverpool High School in suburban Syracuse as valedictorian of her class, then went to Colgate University, where she majored in molecular biology with a minor in creative writing. Because of her strong academic background, she was able to test out of most introductory-level classes and enter as a sophomore. She was also accepted into a pre-med program that would have allowed her to attend medical school at University of Rochester or George Washington University without taking the MCAT, an option she chose not to take.

"I started thinking about why I was pursuing this path," says Rowley. "Was it because I'd been a sick kid or was this really what I wanted to do with my life? With my molecular biology major, I was always in a lab doing research and felt removed from the humanities."

Her dualing interests were a constant balancing act, pulled between pursuing a career in science or screenwriting. At a routine medical check-up near the end of college, Rowley received an invaluable piece

of guidance from her physician, who had attended medical school later in life himself after studying medieval renaissance literature. "Do not confuse science as being synonymous with medicine," he told her, "for one is more closely tied to the story of people."

After graduating magna cum laude, Rowley heard about

a program at Sloan Kettering for recent college graduates that provides opportunities to shadow different aspects of healthcare while working in an administrative position. It seemed like a good fit.

Through mentorship from physicians, she realized she was drawn to working with patients and serving as a patient advocate. She also began volunteering with Visible Ink, working with pediatric patients in her spare time. "I saw much of their uncertainty and weariness in coping with their illness in an earlier version of myself," Rowley says.

In college, at the urging of her writing advisor, she'd veered from writing fiction to more personalized accounts of growing up with Crohn's disease and understood the power of narrative nonfiction.

But she was still a scientist, a background she realized some of her fellow employees working at the breast center did not share. Rowley started a peer-to-peer training program to teach the basics of breast cancer mechanism and terminology to fellow employees. "I could see that it was important to understand the terminology and cancer trajectory to properly do your job," Rowley says. Those efforts resulted in a Leadership Award from the Memorial Sloan Kettering Breast and Imaging Center in 2018.

Over time, Rowley's desire to become a physician became increasingly clear, and though her path to medical school wasn't linear, she says she's grateful for her five years of work experience and the direction that it provided.

As an Upstate medical student, Rowley has focused her interests toward reconstructive plastic surgery, an outcome of her experiences at Sloan Kettering. Although Upstate has no plastic surgery department, she has successfully created her own opportunities. She founded a Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Interest Group and is involved in plastic surgery research projects at the Consortium on Advancement and Care of Research at Stanford University and at University of California-San Diego School of Medicine. She recently presented virtually on use of "Nipple-Sparing Mastectomies in Obese Patient Undergoing Staged Implant-Based Reconstruction" at a plastic surgery

conference and will present at another conference in Atlanta in October.

In addition to coursework and a robust research agenda, Rowley served as programming coordinator for the Docs for Tots Interest Group; served as president of the Upstate chapter of the American Medical Women's Association and is now program chair for the national board for medical students; is a board member of the Multi-Cultural and Student Inclusiveness Committee; serves as a College of Medicine interviewer; and as a student mentor to the Native American Student Association.

She is also co-founder and vice-president of the Scientific Communication Club. "Having just presented my first paper, I realized there is not a lot of guidance for students on doing that," she says. "We've created a forum for students to be able to work on their public speaking skills within the science world and to make remarks concise so that people who aren't in your specific fields can understand it."

Whether she ends up pursuing some combination of plastic surgery, oncology, or pediatrics, Rowley says she is committed to also combining her passion for writing, possibly as a medical correspondent or medical journalist as an adjunct to practice. "That creative outlet helps me connect to patients," she says.

A writer herself, Mallory Rowley helps cancer patients process their illnesses through writing.

