



Outstanding Young Alumna

Mary Jo Lechowicz, MD

Class of 1996

No truer words, than those of John Bradford in the 16th century, "Only by the grace of God, go I," could be said to have shaped my life and journey through medicine. As a teenaged girl faced with her own mortality, I remember feeling vulnerable in a hospital bed and that I did not have a voice. A stranger in a white coat would make decisions that would impact what I would look like physically, whether I could have children in the future, whether I would live or die, how my family would be shaped, and who I could become. Now, before I walk into a room with a patient, I remind myself that this person is someone's family member, friend, hero, or partner. This walk from the patient to the stranger in the white coat, has been quite a journey.

"As in any career, we will not grow without surrounding ourselves with those who are honest with us, teach us to laugh at ourselves, challenge us, and keep us humble. In clinical medicine, we have much of this built in to our daily lives with our patients."

As I reflect on the 20 years since the Class of 1996 graduated, I think of how much things have changed in medicine. In the path I have chosen, some of the most substantial developments include FDA approval for protease inhibitors and rituximab, the anti CD-20 antibody, when I was an intern at Columbia Presbyterian. These therapies have saved thousands of lives and cured so many. We watched the HIV and oncology services change dramatically with breakthroughs. The clinical trials of imatinib, when I was a fellow at the Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins,

was one of medicine's ongoing milestones in the quest for individualized care for all. And more recently, we have seen a deeper understanding and focus in medical oncology on our patients' sacrifice in the short and long terms in the pursuit of cure and survivorship. In my own career, being a part of clinical investigation at Johns Hopkins as a fellow and Emory University as a faculty member for 13 years has brought tremendous reward. The ability to be a part of bringing new treatment approaches to patients with lymphomas and virally related malignancies to reality and adding to the knowledge of these diseases has been an honor. Countless "facts" my classmates and

I were taught in the lecture halls of Upstate have changed, but the fundamentals they taught us—each person has a story, an individuality, and can teach you something if you are listening—remain unchanged. After all, as our beloved anatomist Dr. Camillo Benzo said, "the eyes can't see what the brain doesn't know."

And yet we can't change who we are and where our passions lie. As medical students, Barbara Sherman and I had the chance, with other students, to be a part of designing a curricular course for medical students on Ethics and Medicine in Society. Upstate gave us the opportunity to share the process and our thoughts, as medical students, about the course at a national medical education meeting in a workshop setting. This endorsement of our abilities at such a formative time had a lasting impression on this student. The concept that bringing learners together to review facts and information, process ideas with others who see the world differently than you, and to be able to incorporate these discussions into the professional development of physicians-in-training has taken me around the globe. I have been privileged to be a part of this way of teaching at SUNY-Upstate, at Columbia University teaching medical students as a resident, at Emory University in the newly updated curriculum from 2007, and Tbilisi State Medical University in helping to translate these and other western medical education approaches into their six year medical education system. At each level, the challenges and complexities of the same teaching approach are quite different. Diversity, respect, bias, and communication, while held in highest regard in all of these institutions of higher learning, vary in their expression and meaning in day-to-day practice. As Vice-Chair of Education for the Department of Hematology and Medical Oncology and the Director of Service Learning and Societies at the School of Medicine at Emory University, it is currently my role to try to translate these concepts to learners at multiple levels and to hope for a better experience for each patient.

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In September of 2015, Dr. Lechowicz received the inaugural Margaret H. Rollins Endowed Chair in Cancer, seen here with her family.

challenge us, and keep us humble. In clinical medicine, we have much of this built in to our daily lives with our patients. In oncology, we are particularly aware of this through the physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering that comes with the word cancer for the patient and their support village. Sometimes, when faced with one's own mortality, honesty and laughter are free flowing. One can't help but learn from the tenacity of the human spirit and the power of the hope and faith that things will be better tomorrow. It has changed "the shape of my listening" towards my patients. Through the years, I have asked some of my patients to articulate their journey with cancer in their own way. It is truly amazing to see the beauty of expression people will share through creativity, some with paint and colored pencil, others with words and rhymes, and some with time and volunteerism. Each one reminds me of the vulnerability of illness and the gift of health. This daily education, along with being called "pragmatic" and "an old school doctor," have served my patients well, I suppose, and have made an impression on learners that observe me. I have been honored to have had an award named after me by a few of the graduating medical school classes—the doctor you would most like to take care of your family member. Additionally, this approach and my academic mission were celebrated with the inaugural Margaret H. Rollins Endowed Chair in Cancer in 2015. The ability to achieve this level of acknowledgment is only possible with the honesty, sup-



Dr. Lechowicz is seen here giving a welcoming address, in 2014, to the first year medical students at the White Coat Ceremony of Tbilisi State Medical University. Former US Ambassador to the Republic of Georgia, Richard Norland, is also present in this picture.

port, feedback from so many on my clinical and academic teams and my domestic village. Because at the end of the day, I am Joseph and Marion's oldest daughter, Steve's wife, DJ and Madelyn's mom, and that same girl looking out the window of her hospital room wondering who is going to come through that door and change her life.

**Bio submitted by Dr. Lechowicz*