

SHE WINS

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FROM DOUBT TO DOCTOR:

The Journey No One Saw Coming

By Dr. Angela Downey



I grew up in a very middle-class family. We were hardworking, humble, and had no roadmap to big dreams. I always wanted to be a doctor, but I had no idea what that really meant or how to get there. I had acceptable grades in high school but failed my first year of university (badly). I didn't know how to study, manage my time, or ask for help. Back then, I saw failure as a dead end and gave up on being a doctor.

So I pivoted. I switched into accounting, which came more naturally to me, and eventually landed a stable job. But a few years into my career, just as I was starting to find my footing, I was laid off while on maternity leave. It shook me. I had a young child and still regretted not pursuing medicine. But the doubt was loud: My GPA was 1.8. I was a parent. Too much time had passed, and I had so many other responsibilities now.

Then I met a career advisor, a woman whose belief in me changed everything. I unloaded my laundry list of reasons why I couldn't pursue medicine. She looked at me and simply said, "*Why not?*"

Why not try? Why not give myself the chance?

That one question cracked open a door I thought was sealed shut. I started again. I enrolled in a science program at the age of 26, aced my courses, and rebuilt my academic record. But when I met with a medical school counsellor to get advice, I was told I would never make it. Even with my new grades, those old failures would follow me forever.



That moment could have broken me, but instead it lit a fire in me. I had my second child by then, and I was more determined than ever to rise. I didn't get into medical school on my first try, so I found a job as a risk analyst at the Canadian Wheat Board. It was supposed to be temporary, but something special happened there.

My manager, Bev Szaura, another phenomenal woman, saw me for who I was becoming, not just who I had been. She poured her knowledge and wisdom into me. She mentored me, encouraged me, and never saw my dreams as a threat to the present. She knew I wouldn't stay in her employ forever and supported me anyway. She wrote recommendation letters to multiple medical schools and taught me the kind of leadership that doesn't hoard power...it shares it.

This was the second woman who changed my life. She helped me get into medical school and taught me what real leadership was all about.

I finally made it into medical school. I became a doctor while raising two kids. It wasn't easy, but that's ok, this was my journey, and I lived it one step at a time. I had rewritten my story, and I wasn't done yet.

In the years that followed, I started noticing something among the women I cared for: burnout, people-pleasing, and perfectionism. These were the same struggles I knew so well and spent countless counselling sessions overcoming. That's when I launched *The Codependent Doctor*, a podcast where I share openly about burnout, boundaries, and the emotional weight women carry, especially in caregiving roles. I tell the truth about what it means to recover from emotional exhaustion and how hard it can be to say no when you've been taught to always say yes.

It's vulnerable work, but it's healing for me and, I hope, for my listeners. I receive letters from women saying they finally felt seen, or that something I said gave them permission to rest, to speak up, or to leave toxic dynamics. I don't take that lightly.

I also mentor patients and the staff in my office, encouraging them to pursue their own goals and write reference letters, just like the ones written for me. I know firsthand how a few words of belief can shift the entire course of someone's life.

Looking back, the women who empowered me didn't do anything flashy. They asked the right questions. They stood beside me. They offered their wisdom and their belief. And now I try to do the same for my patients, my colleagues, and the community of women who listen to my podcast.

Rising from burnout, rejection, and failure wasn't just about becoming a doctor. It was about becoming the kind of woman who leads with light, the kind who says, "*Why not?*".

Dr. Angela Downey

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