



The Many Faces of Advocacy: Exploring Psychiatry Through Art

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“Ugggh”

I heard the phrase involuntarily slip out of my mouth one January evening as I opened my laptop to look at the latest draft of the research paper I had been assigned to work on. I had always known research was an important part of the residency application, but lately, I had found myself less engaged with the process. I was only a first-year medical student; what could I contribute?

As a current third-year student reflecting upon many past nights like these, I recalled how paralyzed I was during these first months of medical school. I sometimes hear medical school referred to as a “pressure cooker.” For a long time, I agreed with that. There is no doubt that fear of failure motivated the first-year version of myself. As a result, I felt an overwhelming urge to recklessly immerse myself in a multitude of activities. I engaged in volunteering, attended interest groups, and wrote research papers all while attempting to keep my grades and health afloat. My time and efforts were too scattered to make a substantial contribution to any one cause. I needed a change.

A few days later, the change I desired materialized. One of my peers approached me, asking for my attendance to the pilot meeting of the newly minted Neurodiversity in Medicine Club. I jumped at the opportunity, despite already knowing I had too much on my plate. While there, however, I would begin to discover an idea that redefined how I view advocacy and creativity in my future practice.

Neurodiversity simply refers to the idea that all people experience and interact with the world around them in different ways. In a neurodivergent framework, there is no “correct way” to experience the world. The mission of the University Neurodiversity in Medicine Club aimed to provide education in the care of neurodiverse patients, while amplifying the voices of neurodiverse individuals within the

medical community and beyond. After the meeting, I joined the board. The message of the neurodiversity model had resonated deeply with me, and I wanted to pursue further action. But how, as an aspiring child and adolescent psychiatrist, could I take these concepts and bring them to life?

While on the phone with my long-term partner later that week, a seemingly audacious solution formed in my head: what if we wrote a book? We laughed at the thought, allowing our imagination to run wild with possibilities.

Weeks later, my heart raced as I received an email offering University grant money for medical students hoping to complete art projects related to medicine. It seemed too good to be true, an ethereal sign from above to push forward. I excitedly forwarded the email to my partner, and we began to seriously plan for the possibility of receiving the grant. We decided to create a children’s book that would explain the ideas of neurodiversity in a manner that a child could easily digest. As the days progressed, I found myself more energized to work on the project than I ever had for previous scholarly endeavors. In my spare time, I jotted down rhymes, drafted artwork ideas, and fervently racked my brain for a catchy title. I found joy in conquering these small tasks, progressing toward a goal I had previously thought to be impossible. It was more than just a project; it was a labor of love.

Six months later, our book was in my hands [1]. As we began to promote the book and its message on social media platforms, we were met with an overwhelmingly positive wave of support. Thousands of dollars in project revenue were donated to an international charity promoting child literacy in Ethiopia, a nod to an incredible University faculty member who mentored us throughout the experience. Amid all the buzz and excitement, however, I found myself engaged in profound reflection on how a silly idea had radically altered my perspective on art as a vehicle for advocacy. It seemed ludicrous to me that I had undergone deeper self-discovery through rhymes and sketches than I had through the rigors of first year medical training.

The book has given me a vision for the type of child and adolescent psychiatrist I want to be. It reveals the potent

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synergy that advocacy and creativity can have. Before this project, I had never considered myself to be a creative person. Stick figures had always comprised the limits of my artistic domain. This was different. I had found an avenue by which I could take intimidating or complex ideas and present them to an audience fundamentally different than myself. Through writing, I developed a newfound gratitude for what diversity means, how it is appreciated, and how it is addressed. The book is a true testament to my journey of self-discovery and self-love.

Additionally, this project has confirmed my belief that advocating for patients does not exclusively equate to participation in the traditional medical school approaches of volunteering, policy work, scholarly research, or clinical achievement. This is not to say that these avenues are not necessary or valuable. I simply mean to state that advocacy can take on many forms. Medical students are not invincible, even if we think we are. In sifting through the many options available to spend our energy, we must choose wisely. Devoting time to a project that does not inspire will only yield uninspiring work. We have the power to effectuate change in our own unique way.

In conclusion, I aim to bring forth the aforementioned lessons learned from this book project into my career as a future child psychiatrist. I believe my experience elucidates the unique ways in which art can serve as a therapeutic tool for advocacy and introspection. In the end, it seems that our medical school professors were correct after all: medicine truly is both an art and a science.

Declarations

Disclosures The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Reference

1. Burke H, Donohue K. The way we play. Blueberry Illustrations; 2022.

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