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When Failure is Not an Option: A Story of Passion and Perseverance

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The road from Indianola, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee is approximately 350 miles. However, for Dr. Cherae Farmer-Dixon, she discovered that her path to becoming a dentist required her to travel that road and several others to become a Dentist and Dean of the Dental School at Meharry Medical College in Nashville.

Growing up in the Mississippi Delta, Dr. Cherae Farmer-Dixon discovered her path to dentistry early on when, as a high school junior, she attended a health careers summer program at Tougaloo College.

The program provided her the opportunity to explore the many sides of the health care industry and shadow local medical professionals. It was here, shadowing a local dentist, that her passion for dentistry began.

Farmer-Dixon witnessed patients from poor and underserved backgrounds who were fearful of going to the dentist, or in many cases, were visiting the dentist for the first time. She quickly realized how good dental care, could change someone's life. She recalls a story in which a patient without any teeth came in, appearing much older than she was. Farmer-Dixon witnessed first-hand the woman's joy when she received her new set of teeth and how it immediately helped boost the woman's self-confidence.

Coming from a family of educators, she had no intention of following in her family's footsteps, and yet, that is where she finds herself today. She has spent the last 25 years teaching and mentoring students and faculty at Meharry Medical College.

As to the chance encounter that eventually led her to Meharry, she believes it was fate. Originally having her heart set on Marquette University in Chicago, where her grandparents lived, things took a different path when, as an undergraduate student at Mississippi State Valley University, she was walking on campus one day and happened to meet a dentist. This dentist had attended Meharry Medical College and was also from the Mississippi Delta.

In learning more about Meharry, an HBCU medical school with a strong connection to helping communities in the Mississippi Delta, she knew this was the place for her. Fast-forward to today and Dr. Farmer-Dixon now serves as the dean of Meharry Medical College, where she is also a professor in the School of Dentistry.

When she started her career, becoming a dean was not exactly in her plan. While a senior at Meharry, she tried to soak up all the knowledge she could in anticipation of returning to the Mississippi Delta to practice. She even stayed an extra year because she wanted additional training in the field. It was during this time that she learned about Meharry's faculty repayment program, so she decided to take a year and give teaching a shot. She started teaching while she was in the residency school and was fortunate to have great mentors who really showed her "how to teach." Soon one year became two, two became five and the rest is history.

Farmer-Dixon's career path also took another turn in 2002, when she decided to join the U.S. Army Reserves. When a recruiter introduced her to a special program for health care professionals with a flexible schedule, she jumped at the chance.

Coming from a military family, she was eager for the additional leadership training and professional development she would receive. Today, she serves as a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserves.

The lessons she's learned from her time in the Reserves translate well to her dentistry career. "Taking the concepts I learned in the military and applying them to dentistry has taught me to always make sure I am at the top of my game," she says.

Her time in the Reserves also opened her up to understanding various leadership styles and approaches. For Farmer-Dixon, it's not about the title, but more about, "what does leadership and being a good leader mean?"

It's this leadership experience that has helped her serve as a mentor to her students and other women rising the ranks in the medical field. She reflects on the first time she attended a leadership meeting where she was the only woman in the room. Describing the feeling as "isolating" and "cold," she made it a personal goal to always be intentional when welcoming new women leaders.

It's this passion for helping others that led her to help organize one of the area's largest COVID-19 testing clinics.

"With a background in public health, when the pandemic hit, we first asked, what can WE do at Meharry to help our community?" says Farmer-Dixon.

She knew that with Meharry's resources, they could step in quickly to help test the community. Meharry utilized its experience organizing an annual "Oral Health Day" to quickly get a testing clinic up and running. In those early months, faculty and students spent countless hours reaching out and identifying those in the community who might have underlying health conditions and so had an immediate need for testing. Identifying more than 300,000 such people, they created a screening and data collection process to track their progress in helping local underserved communities get tested.

From this experience, one thing she wants to teach her students is to always lead by example – "I don't ask people to do things that I myself am not willing to do." She believes by showing her students that she was willing to "show up and do the work," it compelled and encouraged them to do the same, showing up day after day to volunteer at the clinic with no expectation of payment, class credit or recognition. There was such an overwhelming desire to help the community, they often had to turn away student volunteers.

Through this experience, Farmer-Dixon was reassured that her real passion is making a difference in people's lives. This passion is fueled by her mentor and former Meharry Dean, Dr. Rueben Warren's words, "Failure is not an option, so let's make it happen" – words which, just like Dr. Warren, she often uses as inspiration.

Admitting she can often be a "workaholic," she believes the magic happens when you "get out of your comfort zone and push the envelope, just when you think you cannot do anything else."

As to what advice she would give to her younger self, it's to make certain to establish a work-life balance. She believes "self-care is very important – you cannot help others until you take care of yourself." It's no surprise that, as an educator, she would also tell her younger self to "always be open to learning new things and embrace others' ideas – everyone's opinions matter."

When she looks back on her career and accomplishments, she credits her mother with keeping her grounded and humble, saying, "I'm grown as long as my mom is not around."

Through teaching, leadership, and service to her community and country, Farmer-Dixon continues to serve as a "hero" for her students, faculty, community, and future leaders in the industry.