

Roshini Pinto-Powell, M.D.: Those who can, teach

By Rosemary Lunardini

Teaching seems to come naturally to Roshini Pinto-Powell. She has twice won the Clinical Science Teaching Award, as voted by graduating medical students. Four times medical students have elected her to be the faculty speaker at Class Day. And 16 times she has won an Excellence in Teaching Award from the Department of Medicine. She has a modest explanation for her success. “I do ordinary things, but I have such a blast,” she says. “I love my job.”

Recently Pinto-Powell was named co-director of the On Doctoring course, which introduces first- and second-year medical students to the practice of medicine. She devotes at least one day a week to teaching two small groups of students “everything about being a doctor—how to ask questions, how to be professional, how to do a physical exam, and how to present and write up cases,” she says.

Pinto-Powell always wanted to be a doctor, but there was a time along the way when it wasn't clear whether she'd meet that goal. She was born in the Indian city of Bombay (now called Mumbai). Her mother was a teacher and her father a judge. “My dad kept saying I would be his doctor one day,” Pinto-Powell says. “I remember going on a family vacation—we had a house in the country—and a tile fell on me, but I wouldn't cry. My dad said, ‘You are so brave. You will take care of other people.’”

There were no doctors in Pinto-Powell's family, but the suggestion from her father took root in her imagination, largely because he died when she was six. “He went from work to the hospital with stomach pains one day,” she recalls. “He called to say he would be home in a few days, but he never came out of surgery.” Her mother became the family's sole provider.

Medicine was always her ultimate goal, but Pinto-Powell decided to first get a bachelor's degree in chemistry at the University of Bombay. In India, however, most students went directly from high school to medical school, and, at the age of 19, she was deemed too old for medical school when she applied. She started business school instead—her distant second choice—but soon a brother-in-law said to her, “Roshini, I know you've always wanted to be a doctor. If you're interested, I will sponsor you.”

Grew up: Bombay (Mumbai), India

Education: University of Bombay, '81 (B.S. in chemistry); Ross University School of Medicine, '85 (M.D.)

Training: St. Elizabeth Hospital (residency in internal medicine); University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (infectious-disease fellowship); Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center (infectious-disease fellowship)

Ambition: To play the piano again

Favorite book: *The Last Place on Earth*, by Roland Huntford, about the race to the South Pole in the early 20th century

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“It's typical for Indian families to help one another, but rare for a brother-in-law,” Pinto-Powell says. “I have never forgotten that.”

She soon found a place at Ross University School of Medicine in the West Indies. “I upped and left at 19,” she says. “I had a fabulous experience there, but I couldn't afford to go home and had no family in the States, so I stayed on the island when everyone else went away. I studied. I read textbooks cover to cover. So my memory for tests, physical diagnoses, everything, is ingrained.”

Life would have been much easier if her father had lived. Instead, with little money and no car, Pinto-Powell began a series of clinical rotations in Florida, New Jersey, and the Bronx, living wherever she could and remaining immersed in her books. “I found kindness from strangers wherever I went,” she says. “I arrived in Florida with about two dollars in my pocket and no place to stay.” A secretary let her sleep in a hospital room for a week until she found a place to live. In New Jersey, St. Elizabeth Hospital lent her a room above an EMT station. Later, during her internal medicine residency there, a librarian insisted that Pinto-Powell use her car to learn to drive.

“The number of people who have helped me along the way is absolutely amazing, so it's just a normal fact of life that I help people,” Pinto-Powell says. “As I look back on my career, I feel like Dad was on my shoulder all the time.”

In 1985, Pinto-Powell began an internal medicine residency in New Jersey. “Some people fear a huge specialty like internal medicine—they feel it's so broad you don't know anything well,” Pinto-Powell says. “I enjoy the challenge of a broad specialty [because] I love facts,” she laughs. “I never met a fact I didn't love.”

Her love of facts eventually led her to a general infectious disease fellowship at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey in 1988, at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the U.S. “I saw tons of AIDS as we don't see it anymore,” she says. “Tons of pneumonia, meningitis, toxoplasmosis, on a daily basis,” she recalls. “I thought it would stay that way, but very rarely anymore do we see an opportunistic infection, because now we know how to prophylax for them.”

As a result of the epidemic, she felt her fellowship had turned out to be too narrow. So when her husband, Rick Powell, M.D., came

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to Dartmouth-Hitchcock for a vascular-surgery fellowship in 1992, she decided to do a second fellowship in infectious disease, one that was truly general this time. During those years, she found what would become a love of her life—teaching. She began teaching a course on the scientific basis of medicine, which led to many other teaching opportunities.

Having completed two fellowships in infectious disease, Pinto-Powell naturally thought this specialty would occupy her professional life, but “life sometimes takes a funny curve,” she says.

After Rick’s fellowship ended, the couple spent three years at Yale. They then returned to Dartmouth, where he took a position in vascular surgery. At the time, there were no openings in infectious disease, so Pinto-Powell found herself working in general internal medicine again. “I hadn’t done general medicine for 10 years, but I slipped back into it very easily,” she says. “Then I filled my life with so much teaching and medicine that there was no thought of going back into infectious disease anymore. The truth is, there is so much of infectious disease in general medicine . . . and my colleagues ask me questions all the time.”

The mix of teaching and clinical practice suits Pinto-Powell perfectly, and she now finds it hard to cut back on any part of it—certainly not on the patients she has come to know over the past 15 years, nor on the clerkships she teaches in third and fourth year, nor even on teaching On Doctoring, now that she co-directs it. For her, there is great pleasure in seeing the progression of students through all four years of their medical education. “It feels so wonderful,” she says, to see them “go from being clumsy or scared to being so accomplished.”

Alicia True, a first-year student, notes that Pinto-Powell “deeply cares about every one of her students. She quickly becomes more a mentor and confidante than purely an instructor.” True’s classmate Benjamin Barrena adds that “Rosh cares more for me than any faculty ever has in the past.”



MARK WASHBURN

Whether treating patients or teaching students, Roshini Pinto-Powell loves her work.

band, who introduced her to all these sports. Gardening, however, is something she has always done.

“I always need to try something new,” she says. “Five years ago, my sister-in-law taught me crochet stitches in five minutes. Now I’ve made blankets for each of my sons and my husband, plus numerous hats and scarves.”

From 2002 to 2006, Pinto-Powell’s mother lived with them. “It was a wonderful experience for all of us to see this incredible lady suffer so gracefully,” Pinto-Powell says. “Rick and the boys adored her as much as I did.” Her mother returned to India before her death. A year ago, the whole family went to India for the first time. With a big smile, Pinto-Powell says, “It’s a big family, lots of relatives. Rick and the boys loved it. They just jumped right in and engaged. It was fantastic.”

What is the secret to Pinto-Powell’s enthusiasm and success with students? “Everybody asks me that,” she says. “And I can only say that I passionately love medicine and teaching, and I think the students see that.

“To me, it’s all been so spectacular. I feel so blessed.” ■