

## Compassionate Leadership: A Conversation with Dr. Patsy McNeil



*December 2023—As we approach the end of a challenging year, it's important to hold close what we value most. In that spirit, we celebrate a central PowHERful contributor who finds ways of sharing her generosity and kindness both in and outside her profession.*

*Dr. Patsy McNeil shares an insight learned through those she's met who*

*face the direst of life challenges, that "sometimes, you need to decide what your attitude and approach will be, no matter your circumstances—and that choice determines your experience." Read on!*

Through resilience, unexpected twists and ceaseless determination, Dr. McNeil is living an extraordinary odyssey. From childhood dreams of unearthing dinosaur fossils to saving lives in the ER, from mission work among the poorest in Haiti to a pivotal role in healthcare, Dr. McNeil has fearlessly challenged conventions and fully embraced the unexpected. Now, with unwavering devotion, Dr. McNeil advocates for a more inclusive world—for diversity, empowerment, and the boundless potential of every young woman.

**Q:** Dr. Patsy McNeil, what is it in your background and growing up that most influenced you?

**PM:** I saw, even as a young child, how the women in my life fought hard, often against severe odds, to make the most of themselves.

My mother has always been the most important model for me. She's an interesting woman: a child of the Great Depression and the youngest of eighteen, she was the

only one of her siblings to complete college. She worked her way through with no outside support. Day in, day out, for years, she'd walk several miles from her night job to get back and begin her college classes in the morning. Once, she says, she fainted in class because she had not eaten.



*Kindergarten photo, five years old in my 1970s glam blazer, 1975*

But she found the strength to keep going and earned her college degree in Education. She taught as an elementary school teacher, married, and became a mother of two. When I was a teenager, my father passed away from heart disease, and my mother supported the family on her own.

My aunts were amazing, too. One in particular was a heavy aspirational influence—she'd worked as Martin Luther King's accountant. She was so sophisticated (that cashmere coat!). She made me curious about what a more expansive life could look like.

**Q: Did you know what you wanted to be when you grew up?**

**PM:** I planned to be a paleontologist. I wrote to a series of paleontologists in the 'Who's Who in America' books that I found in libraries in the 1970s and 1980s, so I was in communication with paleontologists from a fairly young age. I knew it was a possible career.

I also knew that, to get where I wanted to go, to have the quality of education I needed, I would really have to strategize. I entered my magnet high school with the plan to keep a high grade point average and take on extracurricular activities in order to be an attractive candidate and go to college on scholarship. After my father died, I knew I needed to lean into this even more, studying with the singular intention of getting as many scholarships as possible. And this was a time and place where this kind of strategy wasn't particularly known.

**Q: Was your strategy successful? Were you able to make it through college on the basis of scholarships?**



*Ah, that classic dickie lace collar, high school graduation, 1988*

**PM:** In fact, my full-ride tuition through college was paid by scholarship through one man, an alumnus named Jeffrey Reis, the founder of Showtime Entertainment. My mother absolutely sacrificed and paid for necessities as well.

And there were others! Every bit of wraparound support I received was due to the kindness of additional people. I have not forgotten these folks and never will. Every kind conversation. Every extra meal at a dinner table. Every bit of advice and support came from people who had no obligation but helped me anyway.

This is why I support PowHERful. As a foundation that works directly with young scholars and responds to their immediate needs to support them through college, it best fits my purpose and focus. It's my preferred way to pay it forward.

**Q: You wanted to be a paleontologist but ended up studying medicine. What happened?**

**PM:** From my childhood interest in the study of early life based on fossils, it felt like a natural transition to study physical anthropology, and this became my college major. I was quite serious about it.

And then: I experienced a dig. No way. No how. The conditions were so miserable I blacked most of it out! What I do remember is rain, being continuously wet, and not having access to proper bathroom facilities. I hadn't considered how rustic that life would be. I am not a rustic woman in any way!

*High school commencement, 1988*



I'd been a candy striper, volunteering at a hospital, and had done some summer programs in medicine, and I liked it, so Medicine became my backup plan. I switched my major at the end of my junior year. I was able to add just a couple of biology classes and finished on time with a double major in biology and anthropology.

Thanks to my high grade-point average and breadth of education, I managed to get a full-ride scholarship to medical school. I went on to become an Emergency Medicine doctor.

**Q:** You've saved lives in the ER!

**PM:** So many I've lost count. It's been a fascinating career. Now, as a senior executive for a healthcare company, I'm truly privileged to help patients, and those who touch patients, on a whole other level. This career has helped me fulfill my life's purpose—more than my wildest dreams, intellectually and spiritually. And the lifestyle suits me. Medicine was ultimately a perfect fit.

**Q:** What would you say shaped the path of your medical career?

**PM:** There have been many pivotal moments—both good and quite terribly bad. The truth is that every wonderful situation that pushed me forward or generated excitement, wonder, or joy in the work brought an occasional extraordinarily challenging event. And yet, these almost impossible-to-surmount challenges lifted me higher. They ultimately showed me what I was capable of.

**Q:** How about the pandemic?

**PM:** The pandemic: now that was a life-altering time. For me, having all of the responsibilities of being the senior leading physician of a healthcare organization during this protracted crisis, while taking care of my 90-yr-old mother, with 90% of my dearest friends and closest colleagues working strenuously at the front lines of hospitals across the country... It's hard to express how truly dark those first two years were, in every way.



*With my sister Melodi, 1995*

The truth is, I always wanted to fulfill all I might be able to do and to be sure that I never left crumbs of capability behind at any point in my life. Now I know all I have in me. But I hope never to have to test that limit again—at least not anytime soon! I'm still tired from 2020 and 2021.



*Medical school graduation, 1995*

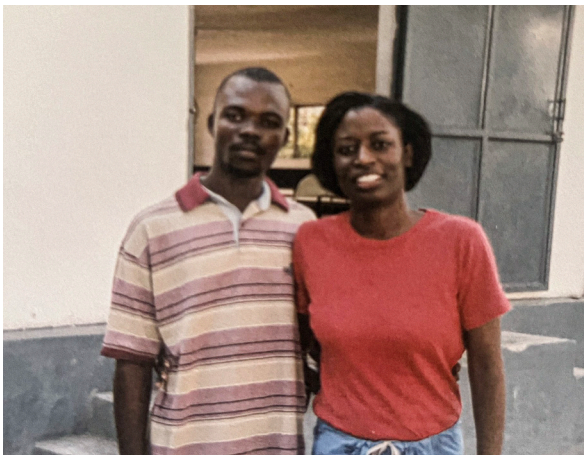
**Q:** Speaking of those tested to their limits, you worked with Haitians as co-director of a five-year mission project in Port-au-Prince.

**PM:** Haiti is a fascinating and amazing place that happens to have areas of such deep poverty and abject devastation as to make one wonder how humanity would allow such poverty to continue. And yet I cannot imagine more resilient people on earth than those I met in Port-au-Prince, who have survived and continue to live in the worst imaginable conditions.

I have experienced the most soul-deep moments of inspiration, laughter, and profound delight with these people, some of who've lived with less than nothing. They taught me a fundamental lesson that I'll try to put into words: Sometimes, you need to decide what your attitude and approach will be, no matter your circumstances—and that choice determines your experience.

Also, when you see deep faith in the midst of true hardship, it deeply shifts your perspective. Even twenty years later, I see how that place and those people informed and solidified my outlook. I was there off and on over a 7-year period and, during this time, the Haitian people gave me more than I ever gave them.

**Q:** These insights are so important that we could end this conversation here. But you bring this perspective to bear on the work you're involved in now as a health-care executive and consultant.



*On mission work, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 1998*

**PM:** It's remarkable how here in the U.S.—the wealthiest country in the world—we tolerate serious inequities. They must be addressed. In my current position, my organization has taken on health equity as a primary focus. Thanks to both increased attention, research and data, we will be able to more clearly define the issues and work towards positive improvements.

Regarding Equity, Diversity and Inclusion generally, I am very disappointed that there has been political pushback against many federally funded initiatives. I find this deeply discomfiting. When compared with other industrialized countries, the U.S.'s history regarding racial and gender inequity is striking and globally unique. Why are we the only country without civilized maternity leave? Why have India, the UK, Germany, and others all had their highest political position held by women—and yet we as Americans have not taken this step? Why are we so slow to elevate African-American, Latino/Hispanic, and Asian individuals, many of whom show distinct merit, to

higher roles? We continue to have skilled and intellectually dazzling women and people of color glacially chipping away at achievements that could clearly have come decades before if only we lived in a fairer, more merit-based society. Too often, I find this cultural 'oh well' shrug of acceptance absolutely maddening.

**Q: What can we do to break through?**

**PM:** Looking back to my personal experience in my teens and twenties: Just single 15-30 minute conversations I had along the way, with those in leadership positions or who were otherwise successful, were always life-impacting and often life-altering. These curbside conversations, mentorships and sponsorships are built in as a given for most boys and men, but certainly do not automatically exist for women or people of color.

I've found that I too often have to approach obviously capable women and push them forward, while men will come to me for advice or support without prompting. This speaks volumes about how women and men are socialized and how barriers to progress are often baked in.

We need people in positions of power to intentionally support and provide mentorship and sponsorship for girls and young women. One-time conversations, taking a young woman to lunch, supporting programs such as PowHERful—these are just some creative ways to help girls.

**Q: As a leader in several of PowHERful's enrichment conferences, what can you share from your interactions with the girls and young women who participated?**



*On a company retreat, my first year as Chief Medical Officer of Shady Grove Medical Center*

**PM:** For these girls and young women, there is a yearning and a need for information on the 'how' of it all. 'How do I get from here to there? What do I do about this teacher, this class, this physical or mental problem, my little sister, my mother, my father, this blockade, this boy, this financial problem, this large or small thing that is in my way?'

The answers to these questions cannot be gotten from a book or a Google search. The answers come from the women and men who connect directly with them in real life, who step into the gaps and become the guides and sounding boards that create clarity, understanding, motivation and support.

The PowHERful enrichment conferences are an important opportunity to provide the 'how' of it all with a multitude of real-life individuals that most young girls would never otherwise have the occasion to meet. I know too that the experiences that corporations or organizations can provide are invaluable and will stay with these young women for the rest of their lives. I know this because the few similar touchpoints I had when I was young have stayed with me thirty-plus years later.

**Q: Can you tell us more about the individuals who have guided or helped you?**

**PM:** Oh, I've had a lot of folks influence my progress. I had amazing teachers who encouraged me, helped me feel like I shined; professors who connected with me and made me understand they 'saw' me. They moved obstacles out of my way or supported my understanding as I grew. I'm still in touch with a few.



*With Soledad  
at a PowHERful  
fundraising gala,  
2018*

I remember, too, all of the attending physicians who supervised and patiently helped me learn procedures in my residency, who were funny and human and beacons of light. And I cannot say enough about all the executives who were so supportive during my business journey.

And I have some amazing, successful friends, forging their way as I did, 'partners-in-hustle' whose relentless determination buoyed me up. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to have peers who are determined, motivational influences.

**Q: Finally, how do you sustain yourself day-to-day as you manage such important work? What contributes to your well-being?**

**PM:** I have a daily meditation practice and a faith-based core of intention that supports my daily sanity and well-being. I am a homebody and an avid reader and gardener. I also like to craft and cook. I exercise, play pickleball, hang out with friends and family, travel, and enjoy live theater and music as well. And, not least, I am obsessed with my dog. His name is Louis. I'm not quite sure how it happened that I've become one of those people who buys their dog a sweater. Yes, it's ridiculous—and he has more than one!