

My dream to become a “real doctor” in the US!

by Farooqua



I am Farooqua, a Pakistani-American woman. I have lived in Eagan MN for the last 20 years. Minnesota is my home. My mother died when I was 14 years old. Youngest of 5 siblings, I was raised single-handedly by my dad who instilled in me the importance of hard work, compassion, contentment and avoidance of self-pity. His motto was “deal with others with your heart but with yourself with your mind”.

My father’s dream was for me to become a doctor. And my dream was to fulfill his dreams! I graduated from medical school in Pakistan in 1990 and came to the US in 1991. While still ‘jet-lagged’ I got married to the love of my life who was a 2nd year resident at HCMC. We moved to Massachusetts in 1992 for his fellowship and within 3 years I was a mother of 2 children. With my husband’s hectic call schedule (every 3rd night) and no extended family nearby, I can’t imagine how I was able to take care of 2 infants all by myself. When I went into labor with my son, my 15 month old daughter was with me in the labor room. We had no other family members there to help us. In 1995, we moved to Savannah, GA where he started his first job. Between taking care of an extended family in Pakistan and paying off student loans, our financial resources were extremely limited. I tried to squeeze in studies whenever I can to enable me to appear for the equivalency exams (USMLE), because the desire to become a doctor was never far from my mind.

In June 1996, we were able to save enough money for the fees and convinced a neighbor to keep the children for three days, as we went from Savannah to the nearest exam center (Atlanta) where the two-day test was administered. With suboptimal preparation, anxiety of leaving the children with neighbors, acute stress and lack of sleep, it is no surprise that I did not pass the exam. Around this time, my sister-in-law and both parents in law passed away, and a second sister-in-law was having issues with an undiagnosed congenital heart defect. She came and stayed with us for an open-heart

surgery in July 1996. After the surgery I had added responsibility of taking care of her for 4 months. This rendered me unable to study for my next attempt at USMLE Step I exam which I had already registered for to take that fall. My husband's job situation was also becoming tenuous, compounding my stress. We made another trip to Atlanta for the exams, leaving the children with the neighbors, with no avail.

Realizing that this lack of preparation was going to get me nowhere, I finally hired a day time nanny recommended by the local church. This way I was able to study for a few hours a day at the local library. Meanwhile both the kids developed severe allergies that required visits to the local ED, hospitalization and frequent nebulization treatments. I would often return home to a peculiar smell emanating from the nanny, and the children crying and hungry. I was too naïve to recognize the smell of alcohol coming from her. Once, I returned home to find a police cruiser outside our home waiting for me to return, so they could apprehend the nanny, as she and her son were wanted for a capital offense. After that I was emotionally shaken and developed symptoms of separation anxiety, with insomnia and fear of something bad happening to my children. I was barely recovering from this state that my brother and his family moved to the US from Pakistan because of worsening political situation there, where he was kidnapped and physically threatened with dire circumstances. We started supporting his family financially. Around this same time my husband's employment was terminated.

My husband got a new job in Minnesota. Here we started a new life, in an apartment with 2 very young children (2-3 years old) and an elderly father, with deteriorating health. Responsibilities of a new employment required my husband to work long hours. My brother and his family also moved in with us, as he was laid off. Getting them acclimatized to a new place fell entirely upon me. In 2001, with my younger child in kindergarten, and both children in before and after school programs, I was able to enroll in the KAPLAN prep courses, to earnestly prepare for the Step 1 exams. I took the exam 3 times in quick succession, and cleared it within a year and a half, in Nov 2002. By July 2004 I cleared both parts of Step II in the first attempt. Although it was not a requirement to get into a residency, I took and passed Step III of the USMLE as well.

After extensively assessing my medical knowledge, work ethics, and compassion, the Hennepin-Regions Psychiatry program offered me a residency position before the official match. On my first overnight call, I was overwhelmed with the electronic record system and shared my strong doubts of being able to continue, with the attending physician. He told me to talk about that a month later. The 1 month became a year and soon the four-year residency was over. In my patient care and all other responsibilities (eg. student teaching, lectures, committee work, and community outreach) I was at par, if not better than recent graduates. In the middle of my third year in training, my father left me forever. On his deathbed, he expressed his satisfaction at my tender care, my

persistence and my achievements. My dream to live up to his dreams for me was now coming true!!