



Perspective/Opinion

“Midwest Nice” and a force of nature: 2023 Commencement speaker Dr. Julie Freischlag returns to MCW to share what she has learned

By Bruce Campbell, MD FACS

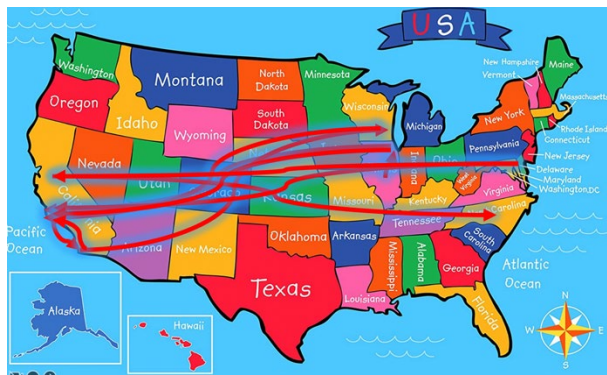
Dr. Campbell, one of the Transformational Times editors, provides some reflections on why his medical school classmate and friend, Dr. Julie Freischlag, is an exceptional role model. He also offers a sneak peek at her May 19, 2023, Commencement Speech...

MCW-Milwaukee's 2023 Commencement Speaker, Julie A. Freischlag, MD, FACS, FRCSEd(Hon), DFSVS, MAMSE, has had a remarkable, glass-ceiling and barrier-breaking career. Happily, a portion of her world-class calling was spent on the MCW faculty in the 1990s. At MCW, we are delighted that she has returned to inspire our 2023 graduates and send them out into the world.

I met Dr. Freischlag in August 1976 when we were incoming medical students at Rush University. There was an immediate kinship; both of us had grown up in Illinois and gone directly from large public high schools to the Big 10 (she went to Illinois, I went to Purdue), and were among the youngest members of our medical school class of 104. Whereas I was pretty intimidated, she was energetic, engaging, fearless, and an immediate favorite of the students and faculty. Throughout our four years as students, she was a quick learner, eager participant, friend-to-everyone, and generous listener. When given the opportunity to do something, she always said, “Yes.” She had no problem expressing her well-formed opinions. She was the embodiment of a friendly, accomplished, “what you see is what you get” individual.

A servant leader from the beginning

Over the course of her remarkable career, each institution to which she moved became better because of her presence. After graduating from Rush in 1980, she did her surgery residency and vascular fellowship at UCLA. After two years at UC San Diego and three more back at UCLA, I was delighted when she chose to move to MCW in 1992, although I wondered how she would survive such a male-dominated department of surgery. Before long, though, she was chief of surgery at the VA where she was principal investigator for a national VA aneurysm study. She won teaching awards as an MCW medical student and resident favorite. She was a dynamic, sought-after clinician, a trusted colleague, and an accomplished clinical researcher.



Her national presence took her back to UCLA to be chief of vascular surgery in 1998 and, from there, she was recruited to be the William Stewart Halsted chair of the surgery department and surgeon-in-chief at Johns Hopkins in 2003. Her tenure at Hopkins was marked by a rapid expansion of the department's commitment to equity and inclusion, and she enthusiastically mentored residents and students. After Hopkins, she became vice chancellor for human health sciences and dean of the UC Davis School of Medicine in 2014. She has been in North Carolina since 2017 and is currently chief academic officer and executive vice president of Advocate Health, chief executive officer of Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist, and executive vice president for health affairs of Wake Forest University. She is also the immediate past dean of Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

Despite her critical and demanding administrative roles, she has continued to be a “cutting surgeon,” and has an international reputation for the surgical management of thoracic outlet syndrome.

Some of her “firsts”

Everywhere she has worked, Dr. Freischlag has challenged the “old boy” status quo and reshaped culture with her positive energy and indomitable presence.

She was the youngest woman in the Rush University Class of 1980 and then the sixth woman to finish the general surgery program at UCLA. She was the first female UCLA surgery faculty member and, later, the first female chief of UCLA's vascular surgery division. She was the first woman surgeon at MCW to be promoted to full professor. She was the first woman to serve as surgical chair, and the *only* woman chair, during her time at Johns Hopkins. She was the first woman to be president of the Society for Vascular Surgery, the first to be president of the Association of VA Surgeons, the first to be president of the Society of Surgical Chairs, and the fifth woman to be president of the American College of Surgeons where, among many other accomplishments, she created and hosted a series on [Surgeons Sowing Hope](#). Her groundbreaking career has been a string of “firsts.”



She has frequently been honored and celebrated. She is a member of the National Academy of Medicine and is an honorary fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. She was inducted into Alpha Omega Alpha while on the MCW faculty. Among many other responsibilities, she serves

on the board of directors of the Association for American Medical Colleges (AAMC), the NIH Clinical Center Research Hospital board, and the Aga Khan University board of trustees.

Her primary interest is people

Titles are important, but Dr. Freischlag's preeminent commitment is to people who need a leg up. She has driven research, co-authored studies, and advanced policies that have increased the proportion of women and underserved groups in surgical fields and in medicine. She generously offers her experience and voice to individuals and groups. She takes on national roles, knowing that her larger stage benefits future leaders and physicians. She is the embodiment of the servant leader.

The Commencement Talk: "Be the Spark!"

I had the opportunity to review Dr. Freischlag's wonderful graduation speech for the MCW-Milwaukee Class of 2023. As I [noted](#) a few years ago, attendees and graduates might be a bit preoccupied during the ceremony and possibly not remember all of her words. So, here are a couple of themes for which to listen:

- *You* are the one who shapes your story as a doctor.
- Each of us has the potential to do the hard work and—with courage, compassion, and imagination—be the spark that makes a difference for individuals and entire populations.
- When entrusted to be part of a team, listen to, and learn from your teammates. Take time to know and understand what is important to each of them. Support, elevate, and promote those whose voices are not often heard.
- As physicians, resilience and "toughness" are important and misunderstood traits. Dr. Freischlag might mention [this book](#).
- Practice self-care even when it is hard. And treat your patients exactly the way you or your family members would want to be treated.



A couple of quick stories; Ask me for more details ;-)

Life, of course, is not perfect, even for a superstar. As a medical student, she made extra money working as a server at a suburban Chicago restaurant. One evening, when I was there as a customer, it is entirely possible that she spilled an entire glass of red wine on me.

On Match Day 1980, the envelope with her name was apparently lodged under a flap of the cardboard box from which the match results were being drawn. When the dean had emptied the box and announced, “That’s all of them! Congratulations,” she sent me to the podium to find out what had happened to her envelope. Happily, her match results were quickly located and the rest, as they say, is history.

While on the MCW faculty in 1995, she was pregnant with her son, Taylor. My wife, Kathi, and I attended a shower for her. One of the greeting cards read, “I would rather be 40 than pregnant!” She erupted in laughter because, at the time, Dr. Freischlag was both.

Finally, if you have the opportunity to talk to Dr. Freischlag during her visit, ask her about her husband, Phil, her wonderful children, and her amazing grandchildren.

Thanks, Dr. Freischlag!

On behalf of those of us who work with the Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern Institute for the Transformation of Medicine, we are grateful to Dr. Freischlag for returning to Milwaukee to give this commencement speech, sharing her hard-earned wisdom, and being a role model for the next generation of servant leaders.

We are grateful for you and for what you have accomplished to make the world a better place.

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