

## **ELAM Commencement Speech**

### **October 27, 2020**

Thank you for that kind introduction Nancy. It is an honor and a pleasure for me to speak with you this evening and to celebrate your accomplishments as the 25<sup>th</sup> graduating class of ELAM fellows.

When I was preparing my remarks for this evening I gave a lot of thought to what I could offer to such a talented group of women leaders. I decided to reach outside my experience in academic health centers and share some of the leadership lessons I've learned in my fifteen years training and competing as a powerlifter. But before I share my story with you I want offer you my congratulations.

Successfully completing an ELAM fellowship while juggling your busy professional and personal lives is a notable milestone and, while it wasn't intentional, the 25<sup>th</sup> graduating cohort was presented with the additional challenge of finishing your fellowship while navigating the trials of the pandemic. If your graduation ceremony had been live I think it would have been highly appropriate to have a wading pool next to the podium so that each one of you could demonstrate your already proven ability to walk on water as you received your graduation plaque. Congratulations on your achievement and thank you

for your contributions to the well-being of your families, your institutions, and your communities during this time.

I decided to learn how to lift weights after being diagnosed with adult onset Type 1 diabetes. I thought that increasing my metabolism would improve my ability to efficiently process insulin. I didn't expect to enjoy working out with weights. I was singularly focused on the health benefits. To my great surprise I discovered that I enjoyed weight training and especially powerlifting because I found it so relaxing.

When I'm lifting I can't think about anything other than what I'm doing. My mind is laser focused on my breathing, the positioning of my body, and the rapid series of movements that I need to execute to complete each lift successfully and safely. Who knew that for me Zen resided in a weight room? Weight rooms are noisy places. There is the sound of cast iron plates banging around usually accompanied by driving rock music that I didn't select. For me, all that fades into the background along with thoughts about the unfinished tasks on my to-do list, the needs of my family, worries, complex decisions, and what's for dinner and who is going to prepare or procure it. I chalk my hands, take a deep breath, picture the lift in my mind, approach the bar, set my form, and go. And then do it again, and again, and again. The world is still out there but it is not in here (point to head). The renewal that I receive from those two hours each

week has made me a better leader, thinker, listener, and human.

That leads me to **Lesson #1: Be unrelenting about creating regular opportunities to relax and renew your spirit.**

Practice does produce results and over time I got stronger, a lot stronger. It became easy to hoist a 40-pound bag of dog food over my shoulder and carry it to the car. Putting my carry-on bag in the overhead baggage compartment is no longer a chore. It was possible for me to help my late husband in and out of bed, a chair, or the car without assistance as his Parkinson's Disease progressed. I discovered that it is useful to be strong.

I don't believe that anyone who sees me enter a room thinks, "Wow! She looks like a powerlifter." I think of my physical strength as an invisible superpower and I mentally draw upon that strength when I'm facing challenges in other areas of my life.

Each one of you possesses at least one source of exceptional capability. It may be problem-solving, diagnosis, research design and analysis, surgical brilliance, care-partnering, cultivating relationships, or living your values. Whatever it is, that special capability brings you joy and satisfaction and fuels your confidence in other areas of your life.

It is the source of **Lesson #2: Cultivate and embrace your own special strength.**

My first trainer had a breadth of knowledge about strength and conditioning. He taught me a lot about the mechanics of weightlifting and how to develop specific muscle groups. During the time that we worked together he became personally interested in Olympic lifting (a related but different sport) and began to encourage me to shift my focus to Olympic lifting. While continuing my powerlifting I started to train in some of the movements and techniques of Olympic lifting. It wasn't for me. I let my trainer know that I wanted to focus exclusively on powerlifting. He agreed *and* continued to talk incessantly about Olympic lifting and his own progress during our training sessions. It was time to find a new mentor.

My second trainer helped me to become more fluid as I moved through the phases of each lift. He also showed me how to incorporate medicine balls (a piece of gym equipment, not an illegal drug) and kettle bells into my training.

A move to another state required me to find a third trainer. I've made the most significant progress with him. He runs a medically oriented gym and is extremely knowledgeable about the metabolism of diabetes, the stretch shortening cycle, and periodization training. When I started working with him five

years ago I needed some new goals and I decided to focus on training for competition. I currently hold National and World records for the squat, bench press, and deadlift for my age and weight category.

While I am deeply appreciative of what I've learned from my trainer, I have identified a different person that I want to work with because my needs have changed. As a recent widow I'm looking for a mentor who will help me to continue to hone my lifting skills, particularly the nuances of proprioception, and provide a warmer human connection. Those two areas are not strengths or interests for my current trainer, so I need to broaden my circle. My goals for the transition are to express my appreciation for what I've learned, briefly explain my current needs, preserve our friendship, and keep the door open for future consults.

**Lesson #3. Coaches and mentors are instrumental to your continued development. No single mentor can meet all your needs over time.**

Lifting, like life, can be daunting. It's easy to look at a steel bar loaded with iron plates and think "That's too heavy for me to lift." That thinking makes it almost a certainty that I won't successfully complete the lift. It is important to know your limitations. In lifting, and many other areas of life, that is the key to avoiding harm. I've learned that my psyche can generate

doubts that are unrelated to my abilities. I've also learned to intentionally overwrite those negative messages with positive truths. What do I know to be true about myself and situations that challenges the negative belief I'm holding? Positive self-talk is not self-deception. I won't tell myself, "I can lift anything" or "This weight is going to float wherever I need it to go." I do tell myself, "I've made this lift before" or "I'm fully prepared to do this." Over time those affirmations have evolved into my favorite mantra. Every time I approach the bar I say to myself, "It's going up."

#### **Lesson #4: Use the power of positive self-talk.**

The people that I admire and respect in my field of expertise practice some sort of discipline to enhance their professional practice. One mediator practices yoga. She believes that a flexible body promotes a flexible mind. Another engages in daily meditation. She believes that calming her nervous system and focusing her energy helps her to be more present and creative. I believe that my experience lifting weights has enhanced my teaching and consulting capabilities.

The purpose of powerlifting is not to carry heavy burdens. It requires mindful assessment of a seemingly immovable object and the use of exquisite form and technique to move it forward without injuring yourself or others. Powerlifting has taught me to know my own limitations and recognize that there are some

burdens that should not be carried and some that are beyond my capacity and may be successfully advanced with the help of others. I see similarities in my areas of expertise, negotiation and conflict management. They both require analysis and mindful engagement with the purpose of forward movement without harm to self and others. The power of that metaphor continues to motivate and inspire me.

**Lesson #5. Metaphors and storytelling increase your effectiveness as a leader.**

Thank you for letting me share in the celebration of your accomplishments. You have all done more than your share of heavy lifting in your career and with the completion of your ELAM fellowship you are even better equipped to lift others up and carry ideas and initiatives forward.