

# In Good Company

## Life on a platter: The unlikely journey of Susan Williams

**Fortunately for Susan Williams, M.D. ('03), M.S., FACN, FACP, she's never been very good at math.**

In the mid 1990s when Williams first considered applying to medical school, she already had a master's degree in food science and human nutrition and a successful career as a registered dietitian and nutrition consultant. Working with an advisor at Wright State, Williams added up the years of training she would need, from pre-med courses through residency, and realized that she would likely be 52 years old when she entered medical practice.

The prospect of more than a decade of intense work was daunting, but Williams' mother asked her, "Hopefully you're going to be 52 anyway someday, so what do you want to be doing by then?"

Heeding her mother's advice, Williams ignored the numbers and started taking pre-med courses at night, beginning with her weakest subject: math. She took a placement exam with a group of undergraduates in their late teens, which wasn't encouraging, because as one of her colleagues noted, "her score was closer to their age, and their score was closer to her age."

Nevertheless, Williams enrolled in a basic math class, passed, and then signed up for another. Over the course of four years, she worked her way up through

precalculus; took biology, chemistry, and other core subjects; did well on the MCAT exam; and applied to Wright State's medical school.

### **From the battlefield to basic (medical) training**

By late July of 1999, Williams was on the wait list for Wright State, and her status seemed unlikely to change. An avid photographer with a special interest in Civil War battlefields, Williams left with her husband for a weekend bus trip to tour historic sites around Chattanooga, Tennessee. When they arrived at their hotel, a voicemail message was waiting for them. Williams had made it off the wait list and was welcome to join the class of 2003.

She was elated by the news, but confounded by logistical challenges. The fact that she was stuck hundreds of miles from Dayton the day before convocation was only the most immediate problem. She was also still employed full-time, and as the only licensed dietitian in her building, she couldn't walk away on a moment's notice.

Williams managed to make it home and join her class when orientation began early Monday morning. She transitioned out of her job over the next two months and dedicated herself wholly to medical school.

"I'm amazed I pulled it off," she said, "although I rapidly learned that sleep was optional."

Williams soon connected with a like-minded study partner, a woman with an established career and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, as well as a dozen or so other students in their 30s or older.

"We worked very hard to learn the material," she said, "to keep our heads above the high-water mark and support one another through the very challenging program. We really gained strength from one another."

Midway through her second year of medical school, Williams hit a low point. She was working harder than ever, had little time for anything outside of school, and wondered why she'd walked away from a stable job with steady hours, no weekend obligations, and a nice salary.

Again, she found support within her own demographic, but this time among faculty members who could relate to her struggle and reassure her of the rewards that lay ahead.

"They were instrumental in guiding me," she said. "Guiding my energy, guiding my thoughts, and saying, 'No, you're not in your 20s. You're in your 40s. But this is where the payoff is going to be as you move forward.'"

### **Confidence, clinicals, connections**

When she began clinical rotations in her third year, Williams said, "I felt like I could make it. I remembered why I was there in the first place." Being in a

familiar environment, working with patients again, and even applying her expertise in nutrition, “just kind of breathed life back into me.”

“In the depths of that second year,” she said, “I was wondering if I was ever going to feel accomplished again, to feel that I was going to hold my own as a professional.”

Some of her professors nurtured her sense of confidence by asking her to consult with patients facing tricky nutrition issues or to serve as a guest lecturer on topics in her field. Sustained by these opportunities and reenergized by her work in the various clinics and hospitals, Williams made it through her final two years and graduated in 2003.

She applied for residencies in internal medicine in hopes of building on her previous career.

“Somehow, I didn’t want to lose that nutrition background,” she said.

During her residency at Kettering Medical Center, she completed two rotations at the Cleveland Clinic. She enjoyed the experience so much that she applied for—and was accepted into—a fellowship in clinical nutrition there. The program began the day after her residency concluded, but unlike with medical school, Williams had plenty of notice and could plan ahead for a smooth, albeit quick, transition.

### Bringing everything together

As a fellow, Williams divided her time between work in gastroenterology and endocrinology, which, she said, “turned out to be the perfect combination.”

Gastroenterology allowed her to learn about malabsorption, disease processes such as Crohn’s and ulcerative colitis, and supplements and other interventions to help rehabilitate patients. Endocrinology



Williams presented a poster on her research in metabolic bone disease at an international conference in 2008. An avid photographer, Williams enjoys capturing images of Civil War sites and Ohio wildlife, among other subjects.

gave her a better understanding of metabolism, including cellular activity, medications, and the impact of conditions such as diabetes, thyroid disease, or adrenal disease.

In addition to her regular rotations, Williams was required to sign up for an afternoon in the metabolic bone center,

an assignment most fellows accepted reluctantly.

In contrast, Williams said, “about two hours into my first osteoporosis clinic, you couldn’t have torn me away.”

“Studying metabolic bone disease took nutrition, endocrinology, GI, and medicine,” she explained. “It took

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everything and pulled it together for me, and that catapulted me into a career in metabolic medicine, with a subspecialty in metabolic bone disease.”

After her fellowship, Williams declined a job offer from the Cleveland Clinic and returned to Dayton. She explored a number of possibilities and decided to open a practice, the Center for Nutrition and Metabolic Medicine, in connection with Greene Memorial Hospital.

Her office opened in January 2008, and Williams steadily built up the practice through referrals from former colleagues and by reaching out to other physicians.

**“I couldn’t have designed it better. It’s been an incredible journey. I am blessed beyond measure.”**

She works with patients with bone disease, thyroid or parathyroid disease, Crohn’s disease, Celiac disease, and other conditions, as well as those who have undergone bariatric or other GI surgery.

“We really have been able to complement what primary care physicians have been able to do for their patients,” Williams said, “and that’s been extraordinarily rewarding.”

Williams is also able to carve out time for research, an interest that she pursued as a resident and emphasized during her fellowship. She has published articles and book chapters, has presented at conferences including the international conference of the American Society of Bone and Mineral Research, and is currently pursuing funding for a

longitudinal study on Vitamin D in collaboration with colleagues at the Cleveland Clinic.

## Choosing the right platter

While Williams didn’t plan her long, unlikely path to medical practice, she feels it led her to the perfect place.

“I couldn’t have designed it better,” she said. “It’s been an incredible journey. I am blessed beyond measure.”

As a volunteer faculty member with the medical school, Williams also has the opportunity to help medical students—including non-traditional students like herself—with their own journeys.

Her advice to older students, and to anyone contemplating an ambitious challenge, is simple: “Don’t judge what you can do by your age. Don’t use that as an excuse.”

If you have an idea or a dream that keeps coming up, she said, you owe it to yourself—and to others who might share your interests—to explore the possibilities.

“If you look into it and decide, ‘It’s not for me,’ okay,” she said. “At least you looked.”

Williams sums up her outlook with a metaphorical question that echoes her mother’s pivotal advice at the start of her medical school journey.

Imagine you could look 10 years into the future, and “someone was coming to you with two beautiful silver platters,” she said. “On one is a successful physician with a growing medical practice, providing state-of-the art care for patients. And on the other is a dietitian who’s also successful, but capable of accomplishing so much more.

“Which platter would you choose?” **VS**

