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Think about your dream job. Then imagine that your parents won’t let you do it. How would you feel? What would you do next?

This is what happened to Kate Pelham Newcomb. She wanted to become a doctor, but her father told her that medicine was not a woman’s job. But with confidence and dedication, Kate followed her dream and became Doctor Kate.
Early Life

Kate Pelham was born on July 26, 1885 in Leoti, Kansas. As a four-year-old, she saw her mother go to the hospital to have a baby. But after three days, she had not returned.

After a short, tearful talk with her father, Kate knew that her mother and the baby were not coming home. Kate’s father explained that her mother had died while giving birth to her baby brother.

Her father soon married a woman named Nona. Kate and her stepmother did not always get along, as Nona angered easily. The family moved to Buffalo, New York in 1893.

When she was sixteen, the boy Kate planned to marry suddenly died. The deaths of so many people in her life made Kate want to study medicine. However, her father refused to let her. Kate decided to study teaching even though it was not her dream job.
Kate’s First Career

Kate graduated from high school in 1905, and then began teaching sixth and seventh grade the next year. Kate liked working with kids, but she found it hard to discipline them.

In 1907, her father, stepmother, and four siblings moved to Boston, but Kate stayed in New York. Later that year, Nona died. Kate’s father asked her to move to Boston to help care for the family and host parties.

For six years she stayed with her family, but she disliked life in Boston. One time, she felt embarrassed when she spilled her food at a dinner party. This motivated her to speak with her father again about becoming a doctor. Seeing his daughter’s determination, Kate’s father finally agreed.

Kate started **medical** school in September 1913. She studied how to help mothers and babies because she remembered how her own mother had died.

Kate graduated in 1917 and moved to Detroit, Michigan to work in a hospital. There, Doctor (Dr.) Kate fell in love with a man named Bill Newcomb. The two married in 1921.

While at a party, Dr. Kate noticed that Bill had a cough. His cough got worse, and the couple learned that Bill’s lungs were damaged. He was going to die.
Nothing seemed to help Bill except for fresh, country air. The Newcombs decided to move to Eagle River, Wisconsin in 1922. They hoped that living out of the city would cure Bill. Dr. Kate had to leave behind her medical career so she could care for Bill.
Life in northern Wisconsin was a big change for Kate. She had to carry water from a well, cook on a wood stove, and use an outhouse. Her new home did not have indoor plumbing like her house in Detroit. However, Bill was starting to get healthier, and that made her happy.

Kate was also excited because she was going to have a baby. The Newcomb’s son arrived in January 1922, but the family’s joy turned to sadness when the baby died two days later. Kate felt that medicine had failed her.

Kate and Bill had another boy named William Thomas Newcomb, or Tommy for short, in 1928. They also adopted a little girl named Eldorah in 1936.
When Tommy was 3 ½ years old, he accidentally smashed his finger in the car door. Kate took her son to see Dr. Torpy, who asked Kate why she was not working. Kate said she didn’t want to be a physician anymore. She left before the doctor could ask her more questions.

One night during a blizzard, Dr. Torpy asked Kate to help a sick woman. Kate started to say no, but the doctor insisted. Kate went to the woman’s house and saved her life. Kate realized that there were not many physicians in the area and that people needed her help. She decided to resume her career as a doctor.

Courtesy of The Dr. Kate Pelham Newcomb Museum

Dr. Kate sometimes traveled on snowshoes to her patients.
Dr. Kate traveled all around northern Wisconsin to help people. Bad weather never stopped her. She went by car, on snowshoes, and even in a canoe. She healed many sick people and delivered over 3,000 babies. Not one mother died in her care.

Have you ever wondered what you have to do to become a doctor?

Learn about Dr. Chrisper’s journey to becoming a physician.

Why did you want to become a doctor?
I have always been interested in healthcare. I like learning how individuals’ habits can affect their health. I also enjoy learning about medical advances in medications and treatments.

How long did you have to go to school?
After high school, I went to college for four years and then medical school for four years. A joke among medical school classmates was, “Can you believe we are almost in 21st grade?” After medical school is residency, and that usually takes four years to complete. This may seem like a really long time, but when you are doing something that truly interests you, it doesn’t matter.

What is the hardest thing about being a doctor?
The hardest thing about being a doctor is when things are out of my hands. One example is when there is nothing more that can be done for a patient; the miracle is not going to happen. I also work very long hours.

What is the best thing about being a doctor?
The moments where you really connect with a patient are rewarding. Medicine can also be very confusing, so I like explaining it to people. This is very important because sometimes the patient is confused or scared. Then suddenly they are on the path to understanding and getting control of what is happening.
Still Dr. Kate wanted to do more. People in northern Wisconsin often had to travel for hours to get to a hospital. Kate dreamed of building one nearby to help them. Her dream started to come true in 1949. She helped cure a sick patient, and the woman’s grateful husband gave Kate $1,000 to build a hospital in Woodruff, Wisconsin.

Soon others started donating money. A group of high school students began the Million Penny Parade. This event collected one million pennies to donate to the hospital fund. Kate even went on a TV show called This is Your Life, and people from all over the world sent her money for the hospital.

Thanks to Dr. Kate, the Lakeland Memorial Hospital opened on July 21, 1954. Another dream had come true for Kate.
Dr. Kate Pelham Newcomb worked at the hospital till the end of her life. She died on May 30, 1956 during surgery to fix her broken hip. Dr. Kate had become a hero to many people. A museum was opened in Woodruff in 1988 to honor her life.

Kate followed her dreams. She was told she could not become a doctor, but she did. Building a hospital takes a lot of money, but Kate made it happen. Dr. Kate’s dreams helped improve the lives of many people in northern Wisconsin.
Glossary

donate (v): . . . . . to give money, materials, or time to a person or cause

embarrassed (adj): . self-conscious or uncomfortable

graduate (v): . . . . . to finish school or training and get an academic degree, like a high school diploma

grateful (adj): . . . . . thankful

medical (adj): . . . . having to do with medicine or a doctor’s treatment

outhouse (n): . . . . . a small building without running water that people use as a toilet

physician (n): . . . . . a person trained to help heal or cure people; another name for a doctor

well (n): . . . . . . . . . . . a place to get water; usually a hole dug deep in the ground

wood stove (n): . . a stove that is heated by burning wood